




Eddie Daniels



Andy Simon



Franklin Cohen



Charlie Neidich



Michele Zukovsky



John Yeh

Zooming the stars

From May to December 2020, Andrew Michael Simon, principal clarinetist with the Hong Kong Philharmonic, hosted over 50 hours of online interviews with leading clarinet players as part of 'Andy's Licorice Talk'. He shares some of the highlights and common themes that emerged from the series

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After hearing me rave about watching some online interviews with well-known clarinetists, my friend Lorenzo Iosco, bass clarinetist with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra (HK Phil), suggested that I start an interview series of my own, as he often 'complains' I talk non-stop about our beloved licorice stick (or liquorice as you call it in the UK) and all the clarinet friends I've accumulated in over 30 years as principal clarinetist with the HK Phil.

Noting what he described as my 'gift of the gab', Lorenzo thought we could have some fun during this difficult era of Covid restrictions. He offered technical and promotional assistance with the interviews under one condition: that we start with Andrew Marriner, his previous principal clarinetist during his eight-year tenure as bass clarinetist with the London Symphony Orchestra. And with that, we were off.

In the first few episodes I sought feedback from the audience about whether the series should continue, treating each episode like a jazz solo with its own length, ranging from just over an hour to sometimes more than three hours. And like a jazz solo, much preparation was done beforehand in terms of research and formulating possible questions. But ultimately, the direction of each interview unfolded in real time as dictated by the moment, often leading to some unexpected twists and turns. Without set time limits, this conversational approach allowed the audience to experience their favourite clarinet stars in their home setting, including exposure to their families, pets, gardens and hobbies.

This format also resulted in candidness on the part of the guests, often sharing information and opinions rarely expressed in public, such as frank and sometimes critical accounts of orchestra management and views on the musicianship of other musicians or ensembles. On one occasion, this even resulted in a full-blown reed lesson by Stephen Williamson, principal clarinetist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Lorenzo also appeared 'on camera' during the series, interviewing fellow bass clarinet stars J. Lawrie Bloom and Michael Lowenstern. He also participated in the 'Performance Under Pressure' episode, before being hospitalised for three weeks with a severe case of Covid, which resulted in a six-week break in the series. Fortunately, he fully recovered.

Some viewers enjoyed the series because they felt it created a sense of community during these difficult times. Others noted that it was heart-warming to see classmates from 40 years ago rediscover each other in the live comments section. Even the daughter-in-law of actor Leonard Nimoy (Mr Spock) chimed in after Alessandro Carbonare confessed to being a fan of Star Trek! A number of past guests watched subsequent interviews, chatting and ➡

providing real-time commentary, which was an absolute thrill for us. Others said it provided a refuge from today's troubled world, where we could celebrate our commonalities.

The historical value of these interviews for generations to come was apparent from the outset. An early show featured 91-year-old Stanley Drucker reminiscing with stories of premiering now standard orchestral works by Shostakovich. He also spoke about working alongside musicians Gustav Mahler had hired when he conducted the New York Philharmonic, and even reading personal poems gifted to him by Leonard Bernstein. Another episode featured the former Los Angeles Philharmonic principal clarinetist Michele Zukovsky, who had concertos written for her by Luciano Berio and John Williams. After studying Copland's Clarinet Concerto with dedicatee Benny Goodman, she performed the piece with Copland himself conducting.

The fact that the interviews were conceived on a whim and realised just a few days later, with a new episode every week and guests appearing on just a few days' notice, defies logic. It still boggles my mind the series garnered over 100,000 views and inspired premiere equipment manufacturers and high-profile music managers to get involved in promoting the interviews.

Documenting the past masters was a priority for the show. Guests discussed: Hans Deinzer, Jack Brymer, Leon Russianoff, Harry Spaarnay, Kalman Bloch, Benny Goodman, Simeon Bellison, Mitchell Lurie, Yona Ettlinger, David Weber, Joseph Allard, Daniel Bonade, Guy DePlus, Herbert Blayman, Kalmen Opperman, Harold Wright, Thea King, Walter Boeykens, Thomas Friedli, Buddy DeFranco, Robert Marcellus, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Jean Françaix, Olivier Messiaen, and many more.

We also presented some guests who might not fit the traditional mould. One example was Lawrence Gilliard Jr., a clarinet classmate of mine at Juilliard who eventually achieved considerable success as an A-list actor. He made some interesting comparisons between music and acting as disciplines.

Another example was the 'Performing Under Pressure' episode, which featured three of America's leading trumpeters and 2010 Wimbledon doubles tennis champion Vania King. The discussion focused on the similarities and differences between sport and music preparation and performance. Osmo Vänskä, a top conductor and former professional principal clarinetist, also discussed the two disciplines' influences on each other.

Academy Award-winning composer John Corigliano discussed the origins of his iconic clarinet concerto and also writing for the clarinet with Stanley Drucker and John Bruce Yeh.

The series also documented many of the historical events of a tumultuous 2020. These included an interview with New York Philharmonic principal clarinetist Anthony McGill during the height of the Black Lives Matter protests; Yehuda Gilad candidly discussing recovering from his own bout with Covid-19; and Wenzel Fuchs detailing the Berlin Philharmonic's measures to be one of the first orchestras to return to performing under pandemic restrictions.

Also noteworthy were tribute videos to two Metropolitan Opera clarinetists who sadly passed away this year; a guest appearance by recently retired Chicago Symphony bass clarinetist J. Lawrie Bloom in an episode with fellow Chicago Symphony clarinetist John Bruce Yeh; and David Shifrin discussing his recent retirement as director of Chamber Music Northwest.

The evolution of some guests' careers was also documented. We learned about recordings on which we could hear John Bruce Yeh playing every chair (principal, second, E flat and bass); recordings of Michele Zukovsky in her Austrian, German and French clarinet phases; and even recordings of Stanley Drucker during a 12-year tenure on E flat clarinet before Leonard Bernstein promoted him to principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic.

Many viewers wrote in with comments on the effect the series had on their lives. One especially touching message was from a clarinetist who planned to sell her instrument but was persuaded not to because the series had rekindled her love for music. We relayed her questions to Paul Meyer on equipment and Lorenzo Losco on playing in an orchestral section.

A special shout-out goes to John Bruce Yeh who watched every minute of every episode in real time! His wealth of knowledge proved handy more than once when a guest was trying to

remember a name or fact. To close out the series, just after the interview with jazz great Eddie Daniels, we had a quick 'coda' discussion with some previous guests who were in the friendlier USA time zone and had watched several episodes. With five guests on the screen at once, it was interesting to note that each one played different clarinet brands.

All guests had a love for their first teacher and had quick and profound advice for young people, especially for getting through these Covid times. All were still students at heart and were never satisfied with their playing, and

many had studied with non-clarinetists.

One hilarious moment was when Michele Zukovsky's husband, Jim, interrupted and asked her to talk about playing with Brahms! He also ended up vacuuming during the 'coda' episode! Her delightful interview was so well-received that the German clarinet manufacturer Wurlitzer created an English language news page to feature their artists' interviews. Sabine Meyer, a Wurlitzer artist who usually doesn't do internet or English-language interviews, agreed to be interviewed after seeing how much fun Michele's interview was. Michele also shared with us that laughter got her through her 54-year Los Angeles Philharmonic principal clarinet career (second only to Stanley Drucker's Guinness Book of Records documented 60 years) and counselled us that 'If you try to please everybody you please nobody', and that clarinetist Harold Wright told her to always have a good reed.

Stanley Drucker's interview touchingly ended with his beloved wife Naomi sitting on his lap. He mentioned that all the members



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of the New York Philharmonic had to wear ties and suits during rehearsals back in the day. He described touring war-torn Germany after arriving in Europe by boat, Woody Allen's comments on his opening clarinet solo to the movie *Manhattan* and attending Toscanini's concerts.

Esteban Batallán Cons shared his practice method while juggling an extremely demanding performance season as the Hong Kong Philharmonic's principal trumpet, simultaneously flying back and forth to the Chicago Symphony trialling as principal trumpet and preparing for his successful audition there.

Several guests from France, Italy, and Great Britain discussed their national styles of clarinet playing. It was also interesting to hear about many Boehm system clarinet players who had performed as guest principal clarinetists with the Berlin Philharmonic given their tradition of using German-system instruments.

Many guests were prize winners of some of the world's most important competitions and went on to be judges at the same competitions, which offered some interesting perspectives on both sides of the process.

Anat Cohen explained that it's not enough to be a good musician today. Having her own record label was just an example of all the hats she wears in her multi-faceted career. Our three jazz players *had* to play during their interviews – it was as though they couldn't be away from their instruments for too long without suffering withdrawal symptoms! Luckily, we were able to compile a video of all three jazz guests playing solos for us. All three talked about the evolution of the clarinet's place in jazz, and Paquito D'Rivera cited Eddie Daniels' *Breakthrough* album as the catalyst for the re-emergence of the clarinet in the jazz world. All three were also doublers

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and agreed that the clarinet was their most difficult instrument.

Guests were asked about the tendencies of younger players and what they focus on when they teach them. Also, what advice they would give to their 20-year-old self? Mostly – slow down! There was a common emphasis on singing on your horn, finding your own voice, the importance of articulation, knowing the entire score of whatever music you are learning, and various theories on sound production. John Bruce Yeh talked about Arnold Jacobs' famous 'Song and Wind' approach to teaching.

Charles Neidich's 'be pro-active' advice, talking about what we can do to help younger players and assert the future of the arts in these challenging times, inspired us no end. Similarly, Anthony McGill's thoughts on feeling down for not being able to perform during the pandemic but instead using his time to create a movement that reached more people than he had ever done before.

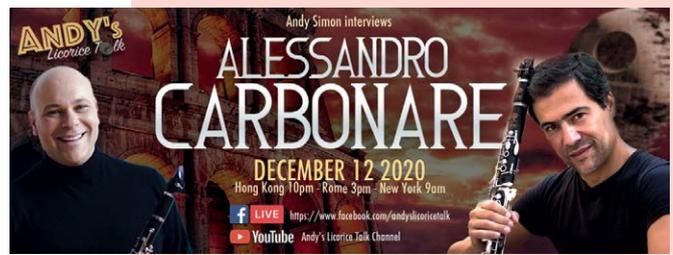
Ricardo Morales surprised us with his amazing work ethic. We also learned of his unusual techniques for dealing with adverse conditions; getting wet and blasting the air conditioning or putting on the heat and wearing warm clothes while practising! He told us about how his grandma scolded him for his constant annoying practice, and he responded by telling her that she would one day fly over from Puerto Rico to attend his sold-out solo performance at Carnegie Hall. That actually happened!

Martin Fröst, Nicolas Baldeyrou and Michael Lowenstern all talked about their interesting online videos and websites, offering us a glimpse into the future of our industry.

While the regular series has ended, we hope to offer some encore interviews in the future, as well as some highlight reels and perhaps even air the series again to give newcomers a chance to see episodes they may have missed. Besides interviews, we are also continuing to produce videos showcasing world premieres by various composers, educational content and highlights of the city of Hong Kong.

Thank you to the thousands of supporters, my friends old and new, and of course all the guests that made this project possible. Happy practising! ■

To watch past and future episodes of the series, search 'Andy's Licorice Talk' on Facebook and YouTube



Missed the series? Episodes below are still available on Facebook or YouTube – search 'Andy's Licorice Talk'

Alessandro Carbonare
 Anat Cohen
 Andrew Marriner
 Anthony McGill
 Charles Neidich
 David Shifrin (plus tributes to James Ognibene and Joseph Rabbai from Jessica Phillips, Pavel Vinnitsky and David Gould)
 Eddie Daniels
 Franklin Cohen
 John Bruce Yeh/J. Lawrie Bloom
 John Corigliano/John Bruce Yeh/Stanley Drucker
 Lawrence Gilliard, Jr.
 Martin Fröst
 Michael Collins
 Michael Lowenstern
 Michele Zukovsky
 Nicolas Baldeyrou
 Osmo Vänska
 Paquito D'Rivera
 Paul Meyer
 Philippe Cuper
 Ricardo Morales
 Richard Stoltzman
 Sabine Meyer/Reiner Wehle
 Stanley Drucker
 Stephen Williamson
 Wenzel Fuchs
 Yehuda Gilad
 'Performing Under Pressure' – Vania King/Mark Gould/Michael Sachs/Esteban Batallán Cons