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# The Clarinet Choir

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I. Title

THE CLARINET CHOIR

Honors Special Studies  
Director: Mr. Ralph Rauch

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Ouachita Baptist University  
Arkadelphia, Arkansas  
Spring, 1969

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## THE CLARINET CHOIR

Music has played a major role in the development of man from ancient cultures to the present. The study of music includes such areas as techniques, melody, harmony, rhythm and musical form. The clarinet choir has become a potential force in music and in its education. In the past two decades there has been an increasing interest in the clarinet choir, a relatively new medium for performing music although it has been around for nearly two centuries in one form or another. This choir is now included in state festivals and many schools and colleges have active groups.

The clarinet has many characteristics. Some of the more accentuated ones are: it has a fabulous control of dynamics, far greater than any other orchestral instrument and this gives the clarinet its unequalled expressiveness. It possesses a great agility and thinks nothing of leaps of two or more octaves. It has fluency and powers of staccato only equalled by those of the flute. Its tone is mellow and resonant, therefore very beautiful.

Alexander Jean Lavignac said, "The clarinet, one of the most beautiful voices in the whole orchestra, is the richest in varied timbres, of all the wind instruments...almost as agile as the flute, as tender and more passionate than the oboe, the clarinet is infinitely more energetic and richer in colour."<sup>1</sup> To Brahms the clarinet rivaled the violin in its variety of tonal colors and was equal to the piano in flexibility.<sup>2</sup>

The clarinet has four registers - the chalumeau, throat, clarinet and extreme. (For ranges see the appendix). "The individualistic character of the three registers (some educators and musicians only acknowledge three registers) appealed to the romantic nature of the mature Brahms. The upper register was the clear, lyrical soprano; the middle register, hollow and mysterious; the lower chalumeau, dark and

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<sup>1</sup>Edwin Douglas Danfelt, The Clarinet Choir: A Means of Teaching and Performing Music (Thesis for DMA, Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester, August, 1964), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>A. A. Schwadron, "Romanticism and the Clarinet," The Instrumentalist, 20:80-6, March, 1966.

sombre."<sup>3</sup>

The clarinet was one of the last standard orchestral instruments to be added as a regular member. There is much uncertainty about the actual beginnings of the clarinet. The date 1690 is generally considered a good one for the invention of the clarinet by J. C. Denner, of Nuremburg, but no one knows for sure.<sup>4</sup> The forerunner of the clarinet was the chalumeau and it existed in Europe during the Middle Ages. The clarinet or chalumeau existed among the peasants and was used as a folk shawn of inferior rank in a short, cylindrical shape, either with a beating reed cut in the cane itself or with a reed tied on. It was constructed in different sizes and pitches. It is even conceivable that there could have been chalumeau consorts.

Bessaraboff gives an outline in digest form of the evolution of the early clarinet, as follows:<sup>4</sup>

1. Prototype - primitive folk instrument, the chalumeau (f-g')
2. First step - two keys were added above finger holes which permitted overblown tones by partially opening either key (f-c''')
3. Second step - thumb hole made smaller and shifted closer to the mouthpiece, becoming the speaker key for the twelfth above the fundamentals and also enabling b-flat' to be played (f-c''')
4. Third step - tube is lengthened and low e key added and now b' is overblown from this low e (e-c''')

An important development was that of the Boehm system which believes, "The correct intonation of a tone depends - not only upon the distance of the hole from the upper end of the air column but also upon its size and therefore, the exact place where the hole is located must be determined by accurate computation."<sup>5</sup> Clarinets today are produced on Boehm principles.

The present family of clarinets, at least in their early stages, was completed when the contra-bass was first introduced in its crude form in 1808. This member of the clarinet family only became useful at the end of the nineteenth century when it was greatly improved.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Danfelt, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

If all the members of the clarinet family are used in the choir, a range of nearly six octaves can be covered with excellent technical facility and flexibility throughout the range. The clarinet family is made up of the following:<sup>6</sup>

- |            |                                  |
|------------|----------------------------------|
| Octave.    | 1. Clarinet in C                 |
|            | 2. Clarinet in B-flat            |
|            | 3. Clarinet in A-flat            |
|            | 4. Clarinet in G                 |
| Sopranino. | 1. Clarinet in F                 |
|            | 2. Clarinet in E                 |
|            | 3. Clarinet in E-flat            |
|            | 4. Clarinet in D                 |
| Soprano.   | 1. Clarinet in C                 |
|            | 2. Clarinet in B-natural         |
|            | 3. Clarinet in B-flat            |
|            | 4. Clarinet in A                 |
| Alto.      | 1. Clarinette d'amour in A-flat  |
|            | 2. Clarinette d'amour in G       |
|            | 3. Clarinet in G                 |
| Tenor.     | 1. Clarinet in F                 |
|            | 2. Bassett-horn in G             |
|            | 3. Bassett-horn in F             |
|            | 4. Clarinet in E-flat            |
| Baritone.  | 1. Bass Clarinet in C            |
|            | 2. Bass Clarinet in B-flat       |
|            | 3. Bass Clarinet in A            |
| Bass.      | 1. Contrabasset-horn in G        |
|            | 2. Contrabasset-horn in F        |
|            | 3. Contrabasset-horn in E-flat   |
|            | 4. Contrabass Clarinet in C      |
|            | 5. Contrabass Clarinet in B-flat |

The richness, evenness of tone and technical dexterity of all these clarinets make the choir one of the most nearly perfect media for musical expression. But before a performer can blend with others he should be able to produce a uniform quality throughout the range of his own instrument. The throat tones should have the same timbre as those played in the chalumeau register. However, this uniform quality can only be obtained when the player has developed a discriminating ear. And this is very essential when you have an organization such as the clarinet choir.

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<sup>6</sup>F. Geoffrey Rendall, The Clarinet (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), p. 4.

The first true clarinet ensemble came into existence about the same time that the double bass clarinet became a practical instrument. There are some people who say the choir could have had its origin when Mozart wrote his quintets for clarinets.<sup>7</sup> It is true that Mozart deserves most of the credit for establishing the clarinet in the classical orchestra but to what extent the influence of the writing of music for quintets had on the beginning of the clarinet choir, no one really knows.

The earliest clarinet ensemble was begun at the Brussels Conservatory by Professor Gustave Poncelet. This group was heard by several great composers of the late nineteenth century and among these was Richard Strauss. He visited Brussels in 1896 and later wrote the following about it in his revision of the Berlioz "Treatise on Instrumentation": "It first occurred to me to develop this idea (the use of the entire family of an instrument in the orchestra) when one of the professors (Poncelet) at the Brussels Conservatory had the Mozart Gminor Symphony played to me in an arrangement for 22 clarinets, namely:

- 1 clarinet in A-flat
- 2 clarinets in E-flat
- 12 clarinets in B-flat
- 4 basset horns
- 2 bass clarinets
- 1 double bass clarinet."<sup>8</sup>

The first important clarinet ensembles in the United States were created in the 1920's. It is very probable, however, that there were other similar ensembles before this time which were used in laboratory experimentation. There were two important ensembles in the late 1920's but it is impossible to determine which one actually was first created.

One of these was the Clarence Warmelin Clarinet Ensemble. There is a strong probability that his idea came from a professor of his named Joseph Schreus, who had been a student of Poncelet at the Brussels Conservatory. Anyway, Warmelin did become interested in this type of ensemble and actually began a group of his own in Minneapolis, while there as a member of the orchestra. When Warmelin returned to Chicago he brought the idea of a

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas A. Ayres, "Clarinet Choir Literature," The Instrumentalist, 18:83-85, April, 1964.

<sup>8</sup>John Morgan, "The History of the Clarinet Choir," The Instrumentalist, 21:42-43, February, 1967.

clarinet ensemble with him. He formed a new ensemble with his students and professional players. This group existed from 1933 to 1938 that we know of for sure and could have continued several years after. This ensemble did use other instruments besides members of the clarinet family. The instrumentation was not fixed and varied from one rehearsal to the next. The music used by the ensemble was made up of arrangements from band music, and compositions written especially for this group by composers interested in experimenting with this instrumentation. Warmelin provided all the financial backing for this ensemble.

The Simeon Bellison Clarinet Ensemble was without a doubt the most important one before 1940. Bellison expressed the opinion that the clarinet "is perhaps the most colorful of the many instruments in a modern orchestra ...[and] is the only wind instrument which can be organized into a complete orchestra."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the clarinet is the only instrument that could be formed into a complete homogeneous orchestra. In 1927, Bellison began a double quartet of students in his own studio. In the next two years the group had doubled in number. Also in 1929, the Committee on Ensemble Musical Training and Scholarships of the Philharmonic Society began its sponsorship of the ensemble which soon grew into a membership of 70 to 75 people. Bellison arranged all the music himself and also used other instruments besides members of the clarinet family. This ensemble lasted over a period of eleven years and during this time it gave many public concerts in Town Hall and Carnegie Hall, in New York City. The final appearance was at Town Hall on April 27, 1938.<sup>10</sup>

On the West Coast a man named John Geanacos, a prominent clarinet teacher, also formed a clarinet ensemble. This group dates back to before the balanced choir movement began and at last report is still active.

In the 1950's the clarinet choir began to have more life and more music educators than ever became involved in the movement. For a long time the group of clarinets had been referred to as family, then as ensemble and finally choir. Why the change in terminology occurred is not clear.<sup>11</sup> It appears that one reason for adopting this term is that the

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<sup>9</sup>Simeon Bellison, "Orchestral Instruments; (2) Clarinet," Musical America, 65:27, January, 1945.

<sup>10</sup>Morgan, loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup>Danfelt, op. cit., p. 26.



clarinet section of the band is called a choir; then, a separate group should also use the same term. Perhaps another reason might be that the connotation choir usually refers to a larger group than ensemble.

The clarinet choir seems to have evolved from two main sources and both are considered influential. One is the clarinet quartet and the other is a full clarinet section incorporated into a band.

The clarinets form a complete section in the band, from the soprano, through alto and bass; and it performs a function similar to that of the strings in the orchestra. Alfred Reed says, "The balanced clarinet choir may be detached from the band as a unit in itself with the widest possibilities for a new form of wind-ensemble and chamber music."<sup>12</sup> The clarinet choir should not only match the strings by its ability to play technical and lyric passages but also by its size in numbers for the timbre, color and strength required to fill its parallel position.<sup>13</sup>

There were advocates for a complete family of clarinets in the band long before the rise of the balanced clarinet movement. The idea was not widely accepted at first but the concept of a complete family of clarinets is gaining support and interest from musicians, educators and manufacturers. This interest has been a strong factor in the use of the clarinet choir as a separate medium.<sup>14</sup> But this is a very slow process and only minorities see the possibilities of such a group. Nevertheless, the composer and arranger will some day wake up to the fact that in the clarinet choir there is the same flexibility as in the string choir. The variety of tone color which belongs to the clarinet family as a unit has untold possibilities. Its timbre changes are numerous - matching brasses, strings and in many instances the human voice. This innate wealth of color gives the clarinet a distinct and valuable place in all music. By combining clarinets with these numerous tonal characteristics the importance of all parts and each separate part will become evident.

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<sup>12</sup>Alfred Reed, The Balanced Clarinet Choir (Kenosha: Leblanc Corporation, 1955), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup>James de Jesu, "Improved Clarinet Sections Via Choirs," The Instrumentalist, 7:26, October, 1952.

<sup>14</sup>Danfelt, op. cit., p. 32.

In 1952, Harold Palmer, who has promoted the idea of choirs in the band since 1947, originated the term "balanced clarinet choir." It came into usage because the majority of bands did not have a balanced section. As it is of the greatest importance for the symphony orchestra to maintain a balance in the string section or choir, so is it with the concert band that it should maintain a balanced clarinet choir. When a proper ratio is found (each band is different and there should be no set rule) this will add materially to the band's total combination. This instrumentation will more than likely reduce the number of brasses and thereby produce a more refined tone.

For many educators and conductors this will seem impracticable, idealistic and ineffective.<sup>15</sup> However, to those who have been fortunate to hear an organization possessing a balanced choir, there is no doubt of its effectiveness and practicability. Of course, this is no easy and quick achievement; there are many problems such as financing a large number of alto, bass and contrabass clarinets, maintenance, the securing of players, and instructors. But with patience, initiative and cooperation the choir will become balanced in due time.

One of the earliest figures in the modern choir movement was James P. DeJesu. He formed a clarinet group that was called in 1952 by the name of James DeJesu Clarinet Choir, using for the first time the term choir.

Also in 1952, Harold Palmer contacted Russell Howland, a professor of music at Fresno State College in California and who is considered one of the foremost exponents of fine woodwind playing in the United States, to see if he would begin a clarinet choir at the High Plains Music Camp in Hays, Kansas the next summer. Mr. Howland wrote this in a recent letter to me,

"My first summers there (at the camp) were as a woodwind specialist then Mr. Harold Palmer, the camp director, suggested organizing a clarinet choir and asked me to run it. It seemed like a good idea until I looked around for literature and found nothing for the sort of choir I visualized. The only printed things available were a few trite arrangements for clarinet quintet (3sp., al., bs.). So I started in to make transcriptions of things I thought were great music and would

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<sup>15</sup>William D. Revelli, "The Balanced Clarinet Choir," The Instrumentalist, 7:26, November and December, 1952.

fit the idiom well. Continuously working at this I have built what is probably the largest library of this kind in existence. I also add other woodwinds and harp parts to the basic clarinet choir and use the music for our ensemble class here (which he organized in 1956)."

For the first few years of existence of the clarinet choir at High Plains Music Camp the Selmer and G. LeBlanc Corporations were most helpful in supplying the contrabasses, until now there are enough in the various schools to supply this section of the choir. The contrabass clarinet will continue to find its way into the progressive bands of today and tomorrow as it has been doing in the past decade. It has proven its ability to reinforce the fundamental tones, thus producing stronger and richer overtones.

From 1952 until today the clarinet choir movement has seen rapid development and interest beyond anything that could have been foreseen even as late as 1950. Many educators were quick to recognize the importance of this new medium but they are by far a minority. But even so, many of the big music conferences began to include the clarinet choir in their programs and some even promote clinics directed by men, such as, Harold Palmer. The increased interest in the new sound and concept is evident through the appearance of some instruments that have been very much neglected.

As the movement is young, good literature is comparatively limited. The main source of repertoire is from transcriptions. There are yet thousands of pages of the most inspired string quartets that can be adapted for clarinet choir with very little alteration. Literature is increasing in number though. By January 1, 1963 approximately 1 out of 4 works listed in publisher's catalogs were original compositions.<sup>16</sup> The proportion is increasing since most of the original works have been issued relatively recently. But more and more the need for literature is being felt for it is in demand all the time.

Howland feels that "the biggest disappointment has been the lack of attraction for good and established composers to write original music for it. When this happens the clarinet choir will have grown out of its infancy and become a permanent musical medium in its own right."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ayres, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Russell S. Howland, "The Clarinet Choir - Its Development and Use," The Instrumentalist, 18:78-79, November, 1963.

Yet, all that has been accomplished in this new medium so far is but a scratch on the surface of the clarinet choir's great potential for the future.

This special studies has really meant a great deal to me because I got to learn a little about a medium of musical performance I knew nothing of. It was enjoyable reading and research but also I found great enjoyment in listening to the recordings available of an actual clarinet choir. These recordings were made of performances at the High Plains Music Camp during the years 1962, 1963, and 1967. This was an experience I shall never forget.

APPENDIX

Figure 1. The registers of a clarinet.

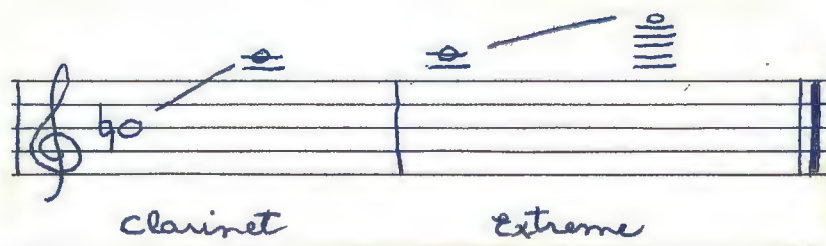
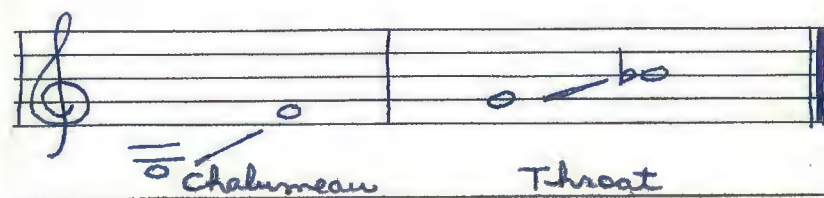
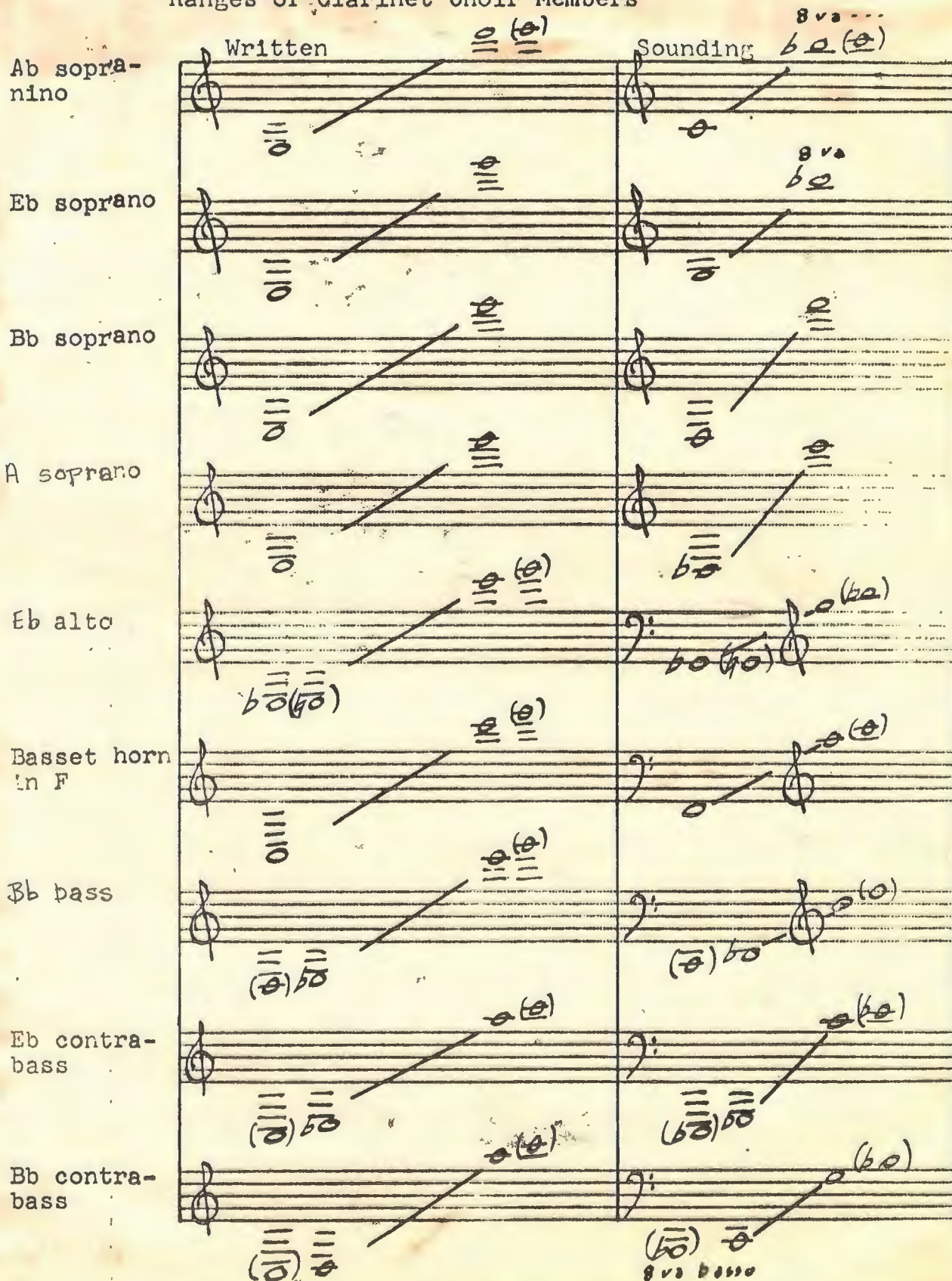


Figure 2. The Ft. Hays Balanced Clarinet Choir, 1960.



Figure 3.

Ranges of Clarinet Choir Members



Taken together, the total range is six octaves.

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