

Victoria Samek is a formidable musician and the founder and director of Clarinet & Saxophone Classics, the specialist single-reed record label featuring a diverse catalogue of new music, neglected works, 'mainstream' repertoire, period performance and restored historical recordings. 2017 marks 25 years since the label came into being and it's still going strong – but not without some personal cost to Samek. Here, she tells Chris Walters about the highs and lows that have defined the last quarter century of her life

# Silver anniversary

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**CW** How did Clarinet & Saxophone Classics first come about?

**VS** People might think that the company started in a blaze of what I wanted to do. But actually I had no other option. I was always hungry, looking for new works, and I discovered that Copland had arranged his Violin Sonata for clarinet and piano. I gave the UK premiere and it took another year to get the rights to make the world premiere recording.

The recording was originally going to be released on the independent label AVM, who had indeed booked the studio and recording team. However, the 90s were a difficult time for CD labels. Many were to go into liquidation, including AVM. A tip-off from the studio gave me the opportunity to buy back the master.

What I was to discover in taking the master to several independent labels for consideration was later to become the central mission of Clarinet Classics – that while CD companies often included more than one string player, pianist and even singer, the same rule did not apply to clarinet players. So while we had many positive replies, the one-player rule was to prove non-negotiable.

Having gone through so much to get this far, this recording was not going to fail at the final hurdle. My brother was well positioned in the industry at that time and suggested that we release it ourselves. While I initially felt great trepidation, the idea of the label being a truly international platform, encompassing new music, historical restoration recordings and period performances was irresistible. We won the *Sunday Times* Record of the Year with that first disc which was a huge endorsement, not only for me but also for Clarinet Classics.

Slowly our distribution extended to all the major territories and of course the UK. Alongside the distribution we were building a loyal following of customers through our mail-order system. The company built up and we were making a lot of recordings.

I learned a lot about restoring historical recordings, which were some of the most exciting discs for me. I also wanted to bring clarinet music to a wider audience beyond the clarinet fraternity. You could say I was on a mission. Repertoire and

programming was crucial in this pursuit. What clarinetists call mainstream music is often pretty obscure and – forgive me for saying this – not great music to listen to, although it might be more interesting to play! I wanted to be purist but not populist. It was about striking a balance – finding some way to draw people in and encourage them to pick up a recording.

No 13 was our first saxophone disc, which featured a restoration recording of Marcel Mule. To me the sax can be very poorly represented. It suffers from an inferiority complex of not being taken seriously. This I feel still has negative implications for players and indeed programmes.

Recordings and programmes should be about the music, not the player. The sax suffers from this, as does the clarinet to

I began to feel that I'd had enough of the conflicts I was feeling. I started to step away from the mainstream and focus on solo, chamber performance, recordings and teaching. More than anything, I do not want to lose the love of music and my instruments. This can happen so easily, after which daily warm-ups along with playing standards can start to be compromised.

Playing, recording and my teaching life carried on, and I had my three gorgeous children. But it wasn't an easy path, to do it like I did on my own terms. If you're not a BBC Young Musician, sustaining a solo career is difficult. Why have I stuck with it? Because of commitment to the music and to the clarinet and the sax, I just could not have imagined doing anything else. Music is my life.

The label carried on developing and, with it, the list of artists grew. This for me personally was a great endorsement of the company

some extent. Programmes can be skewed as a result. I personally have a great commitment to the instrument, although people don't see me as a sax player. I take it seriously, and as such it's part of my daily warm-up.

The label carried on developing and, with it, the list of artists grew. This for me personally was a great endorsement of the company and what we were trying to achieve. The next stage was expansion into downloads, around the time when iTunes first went into classical music. There were also more commissions, including a new bass clarinet concerto by Thea Musgrave. I gave a live BBC broadcast of the concerto with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra before going on to record it with the same orchestra under Thea's direction, along with her clarinet concerto – a very special experience!

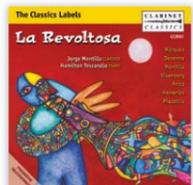
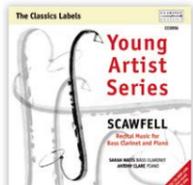
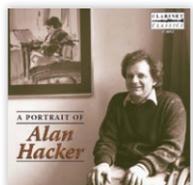
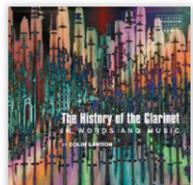
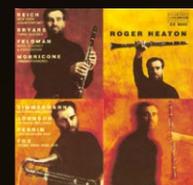
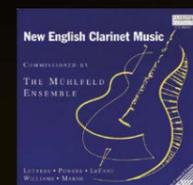
**CW** The label must have been a huge undertaking. How did it affect your life?

**VS** Starting the label was a clear point when my professional life changed. It was seen as a vanity label and was greeted with very mixed feelings. I've got a tough side, but I was irritated. People totally misconstrued what the label was about.

**CW** You recently gained a Performance Science MSc from the Royal College of Music. How has this affected your outlook?

**VS** I have always been fascinated and indeed curious about how we do what we do, and analytical about the process. So when the Royal College of Music launched this new masters, I was hugely attracted. However, I have never thought of myself as academic. It was quite nerve-wracking even to apply. The first term was like being swept up on a wave, although to learn about concepts I had perceived in my playing and teaching, and to read so many theories and research papers – it was totally fantastic! Science is so beautiful, so structured, so pure and thorough!

It was an amazing first term, but my life began to unravel. Lots of personal issues that hadn't been dealt with began to surface – historical family stuff. One of the modules was psychology. Putting proper labels on things that related to my own life and experience provoked a series of enormous realisations, and the rug started to pull from under my feet. In filling out research data I found myself lying. I had prided myself on self-honesty... It's also not easy being a mature student when my life prior to the masters had been in



playing and business. My self-image took quite a knock!

When you're sinking, you don't want to drag others down with you. So I retreated into myself. Things started getting even choppy. Life was falling apart – except for the masters, my playing and my teaching. It was like I had two different sides of life – the things that had to keep going, and the things that couldn't keep going.

One morning I couldn't move my left arm and was in excruciating pain. Regular treatment with a deep tissue and acupuncture therapist thankfully got things moving again. But physical issues were in fact the start of mental breakdown; I crashed very badly. The masters was a lifeline, but it was a horrible time, particularly for my family, and a dark time for me.

Worse was to come as I developed an ovarian cyst. The NHS didn't act for three months, until spotting a borderline tumour finally led to an operation. With major surgery involved to remove rather more than originally planned, I needed 10 weeks in bed to recover. While playing was of course out of the

question, I was able to continue working on my dissertation and the final module. Frankly it kept me sane, particularly after being readmitted due to infection.

The question which could not be answered till I was allowed to get up was, would I be able to play again? I had already decided I would sell the instruments if I couldn't play as before. It was quite a moment when I tried to play for the first time.

I was relieved to find that there was a spark! Building back my playing had to be carefully managed. A recording of clarinet and saxophone works by Rob Keeley scheduled for the autumn gave me huge motivation.

Getting back on my feet again I re-evaluated everything. I don't see the world as I saw it before. Could I still run the CD label? Before I had got ill, two quite important developments had happened to the business. I decided to combine clarinet and saxophone into one website and one title – Clarinet & Saxophone Classics. I had started developing a new wing of the business with the publication of sheet music under the title Clarinet & Saxophone Publications.

I was passionate, but was I strong enough both physically and mentally? I feel a deep sense of responsibility to the artists and composers. My supportive team ensured that the two recordings scheduled for 2106 – *French Exports* with Béatrice Berne and Jean-Marc Fessard and *Flying Solo* with Janet Hilton – were not compromised. We had also recently published Guilhaud *Trois Pieces*, arranged by Marilyn Strevens for B flat and E flat saxophones. This caught the eye of ABRSM. *Trois Pieces* (now included on the ABRSM syllabus) and the rest of our expanding catalogue of sheet music are now available in hard copy through June Emerson Wind Music. Meanwhile, I completed the masters and graduated, which was quite a day. I started to feel that I had it in me to keep going, but life and priorities needed to change.

My advice is that everyone should remind themselves why they are playing their instrument. 'Because I love it' is a great reason

**CW** That's quite a story! I'm glad you are finding your way back to health. Are you now able to move forward with new projects?

**VS** Before thinking about new projects I still had some deep concerns how I was managing my business life. Almost exactly a year after my original meeting with Paul Rodgers, now my creative director, along with my web designer and technical advisor William Gets, Samek Music was launched and with it a totally new branding for the label. Quite simply I had finally moved into the 21st century. Through the new website I can now offer gift tokens, full profiles of all our artists, a fast-developing library of contextual podcasts promoting each CD, and informative educational podcasts. I am keen to promote our current collection of rich and diverse CDs – we actually have nearly 80 recordings and close to 20 publications.

Publications scheduled for 2018 include new works by Rob Keeley and Rob Howatt, who is launching our young composer series. Historical recordings are also firmly on the 2018 agenda, as is a new recording of four concertos: Malcolm Arnold's

Clarinet Concerto No 2 and Stanford's Clarinet Concerto in a new arrangement for clarinet and wind band by Stephen Roberts, who is also writing me a double sax concerto for soprano and alto saxes. Also, Rob Buckland will be the soloist in a new saxophone concerto by Jeffery Wilson. Publication of all the works will follow.

In addition, Thea Musgrave has transcribed *Orfeo IV*, a piece for live and pre-recorded flutes. She has rearranged the piece for me for live E flat clarinet and pre-recorded B flat and bass clarinet. Both the recording and the premiere performance are scheduled for 2018 – Thea's 90th birthday year – and performers will be able to buy my pre-recorded version to play along with.

Another important development is that since the masters I have developed and written a new and innovative method relevant to all levels and all ages, outlining a diagnostic framework for self-directed practice from which a blueprint of instruction for performance can rely. Based on sound scientific theories rather than opinionated rhetoric, it is a logical and engaging method which also forms the basis of my teaching. Currently with my editor, its preliminary publication date is 2018.

**CW** To end with, what would you say motivates you now?

**VS** What motivates me to do things? Music, which I believe is the most wonderful art form, a hunger for learning and knowledge, and the desire and commitment to strive for excellence in every area of my life.

**CW** And what advice would you give to other artists?

**VS** My advice is that everyone should remind themselves why they are playing their instrument. 'Because I love it' is a great reason and the fuel for dedication, discipline and determination. Never lose touch with why – and keep up your daily warm-up. ■

Go to [www.samekmusic.com](http://www.samekmusic.com) and click on the Seasonal Gift button on the home page to claim a free gift from Clarinet & Saxophone Classics.

Victoria is a D'Addario Performing Artist and endorsee for Selmer Paris.



# A good READ

The CASSGB library contains a wide range of books, free for members to borrow. Stephanie Reeve introduces some of the most inviting volumes

As well as sheet music, CASSGB has a considerable collection of books available to borrow. Titles cover a range of specialisms including instrument history, technique, biographies and orchestration, across various styles from early classical to jazz and modern music. Many of the instrument histories and biographies are written by players, and these are variously honest, frank, humorous and light hearted, offering specific advice and insight into various aspects of the single-reed world. While some of the older titles may appear to be somewhat dated now that information is constantly at our fingertips, they are still useful references. This article looks at titles covering the history and technical development of the clarinet and saxophone.

When I started at college, my teacher recommended I get a book on the clarinet, and the names Geoffrey Rendall and Oscar Kroll were given as starting points. I didn't track these down but I did find Thurston (*Clarinet Technique*, 1964) in a second-hand bookshop, and got Brymer (*Clarinet*, first published 1976) for Christmas, so that at least gave me something to get going with. I read Paul Harvey's *Saxophone* the following December. While the authors may be musicians first and writers second, they all write with authoritative voices.

I found Brymer serious and instructive, covering the basic history of the clarinet and offering useful repertoire lists complete with comments on each piece, while the Thurston, small enough to fit in a side pocket, included clear, no-nonsense advice on clarinet technique.

Since then I have read Kroll (*The Clarinet*), written in 1944 before his death in the second world war and published some years later, and Rendall (also *The Clarinet*, 1971). Both include useful histories of the clarinet, with Rendall covering much more on the mechanics of the instrument and acoustics. By this time I was familiar with the basic history of the clarinet, but both had something new to add.

The earliest book on the saxophone is by Ben Davis, published by Selmer in 1935 (*The Saxophone*). Designed as a tutor it is also a reference, although it shows its age when Davies writes in the introduction: 'The history of the saxophone can be summed up in one line: "Invented 1847, by Adolphe Sax, Belgian instrument maker."'

David Pino's *The Clarinet and Clarinet Playing* (1980) offers an American view with plenty of advice and tips on technique.

*Clarinet and Saxophone Experience*, by Stanley Richmond, is aimed at both clarinet and saxophone players and is very much a manual on the set-up and technical aspects of both instruments.

New publications come out every few decades, exploring the history in even more detail or presenting new ideas. Cambridge published its *Companion to the Clarinet*, edited by Colin Lawson (1995), and its *Companion to the Saxophone*, edited by Richard Ingham (1998), both of which are clear and comprehensive references with each chapter written by a specialist.

The books by Anthony Baines, *Musical Instruments Through the Ages* and *Woodwind Instruments and their History*, are both excellent generalist books. John Newhill's two books on the basset horn are worth investigating, and there is even an

*Alto Clarinet Companion* by John Pear and Glyn Brown-Evans. If you want to specialise even further, try Kalmen Opperman's *Making and Adjusting Single*

While the authors may be musicians first and writers second, they all write with authoritative voices

*Reeds* from 1956. Even if you don't want to make your own reeds it contains useful tips on adjusting them.

If you are more interested in the characters behind the instruments, *Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past* by Pamela Weston follows the history and development of the clarinet through accounts of its exponents, exploring among others the lives of Stadler, Baermann, Mühlfeld and Thurston. Weston's follow-up title, *More Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past*, is an index with information on many more players not covered by the first volume.

As a younger instrument, the origins of the saxophone are well documented and its inventor's life has been charted by Wally Horwood in *Adolphe Sax: His Life and Legacy*. Eugene Rousseau looks at the life of an early saxophonist in *Marcel Mule: His Life and the Saxophone*.

All of the above titles are available for members to borrow free of charge from the CASSGB library, so why not make the most of your membership and get in touch via the website or by email ([librarian@cassgb.org](mailto:librarian@cassgb.org)). ■