

## Confessions of a Contra-loving Composer

An Interview with Daniel Dorff

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**A**s the assistant principal and contrabassoonist of the Louisville Orchestra, my duties have always been quite varied. Some weeks I play principal on an opera, another it's second bassoon on a Masterworks concert, and the next week Contra on a new music concert. With 18 bassoon students (all of whom I make reeds for) and 3 small children at home, I have more than enough to keep me busy. I have always been serious about the contrabassoon as an orchestral instrument, but never considered trying to perform as a soloist on anything longer than 8 feet!

In 1994, I received a tape of Daniel Dorff's recently premiered *Concerto for Contrabassoon* that changed my mind. Upon hearing the first notes, I knew this work was different. It was accessible and beautiful, yet very exciting at the same time. I definitely wanted to perform this work. Surprisingly enough, after a little schmoozing, I got the chance to perform it on 4 education concerts with the Louisville Orchestra. I recently had the privilege to perform it again, this time with the Haddonfield (NJ) Symphony under its Music Director, Daniel Hege (who is also Assistant Conductor of the Baltimore Symphony).

In between these two performances, I gave the world premiere of Dorff's "In a Deep Funk" for solo contrabassoon at the 1997 IDRS convention in Evanston. Daniel Dorff now has written even more contrabassoon music. Why is he so obsessed with writing for this noble beast? I'm going to ask him.

**RS: Since you're not a bassoonist yourself, how did you get started writing contrabassoon music?**

**DD:** In June 1989, Norman Spielberg asked if I'd write a concerto for contrabassoon and strings for him to premiere with the Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia. Norman had been playing Vivaldi bassoon concerti with them every spring, and he felt it would be refreshing to use his concerto slot differently. Norman chose me because he wanted a composer who'd show the lyrical expressive side of the contra and who could write passagework sympathetic to the player while still being flashy. Since I'm a bass clarinetist, my ear, attitude, and fingering knowledge would be a head start.

My first reaction was to say no thanks! I'd already



composed enough music for odd combinations, and I didn't want to create another dead end. Fortunately, Norman pointed out that every professional orchestra has a solid contra player with no standard repertoire to play, and he also reminded me how alluring the contra solos are in Ravel's *Mother Goose* and *Concerto for the Left Hand*.

I realized this would be a fascinating project and asked for a few instruments other than just string orchestra for the accompaniment. I chose clarinet and horn because the high bright clarinet emphasizes the contra's deepness while blending in a colorful way, and the horn's rich long notes make the contra's passagework seem even more supple.

**RS: How did you build the concerto, and were you concerned about balancing the contra against the orchestra?**

**DD:** I was very concerned not to cover up the soloist and spent a lot of effort working out textures to ensure this. Many players have told me that's one of the reasons the concerto is a success.

*Concerto for Contrabassoon* is in three movements played without pause, and it basically goes from slow to moderate to fast and faster, like a Rossini overture. Movement I is just a short prologue for the orchestra with a contrabassoon cadenza in the middle (one way to avoid balance problems!); Movement II glides through a chain of dances in 3; Movement III is also dance-based, but in 4, with a more evident jazz influence.

Being a clarinetist, I knew F Major was the bassoon's most natural home key, so I put many themes and some flashy passagework in F, but the harmony moves out of strict keys and through sharp keys, so there's a lot to practice! ♦