

# The clarinet: history and players essay sample

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The clarinet is such a small musical instrument, but has such a large variety of uses. I play the clarinet myself, and this is what provoked me to choose it as my topic. The Area of Interaction acquainted with this topic is Human Ingenuity because music is a wonderful creation that is a form of entertainment to many people around the world. The clarinet has a unique build, a great deal of refining to go through, an intriguing history, several “spin-offs” of itself, and has been the key to many musicians’ careers.

A clarinet is “a woodwind musical instrument in the shape of a cylindrical tube having a single reed mouthpiece” (Merriam Webster Intermediate Dictionary). The clarinet disassembles into seven parts. They are the bell, lower joint, upper joint, the barrel, the mouthpiece, the ligature, and the reed. The ligature holds the reed to the mouthpiece. The reed vibrates the air that is blown into the clarinet and the size of the air column determines the pitch. You change the size of the air column by placing your fingers over the holes or onto the keys on the two joints of the clarinet. The bell’s purpose is to help the tone of the lower notes. The clarinet’s large pitch range is divided into three ranges: The Chalumeau range (going from the lowest note, E to B flat), the Clarion range (which goes from B to C), and the Altissimo range (which goes from C sharp on up).

The creator of the clarinet was Johann Christoph Denner. He was a German musician; however, he devoted his time mostly to refining existing woodwind instruments. (Encyclopedia Britannica). The instrument that he refined to create the clarinet was the Chalumeau, which is said to be the first single reed instrument that existed. The Chalumeau had the range of F (one above the E) to B flat. All Denner did to the chalumeau was add on a register key,

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which increased the notes by a twelfth. (The register key made it possible that, when it was pressed, the pitch would go up 12 notes, including the starting and ending notes.) After he did this, the clarinet was born. As with any new creation, the clarinet was refined after it was invented. Over the years, many different people improved the clarinet to make it easier to play and to give it a better tone. Some added keys for a longer range, while others added parts for fluency. Many different versions of the clarinet were being used all the way up until 1843. But that year, after being developed for use on the clarinet since 1839, The Boehm Key System was introduced for the clarinet. This became the standard key system for the clarinet and was patented the following year.

With it, the clarinet has a very high range, about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  - 4 octaves. This key system is still used today. (Ironically, Theobald Boehm, the man whom the key system was named after, was not directly involved with the creation of this specific key system. It was named after him because he inspired the men who did create it with his invention of the Boehm Key System for the flute.) There are multiple types of clarinets. They range from the sopranino clarinet, being the highest pitched clarinet, to the octocontrabass, or subcontrabass, clarinet, being the lowest pitched clarinet (Note that octocontrabass clarinets are not mass produced and there might only be one in existence). The clarinets used most frequently are as follows (the number in parenthesis is the number of octaves the instrument is away from the standard clarinet in pitch, with the (+) or (-) telling whether the instrument is higher or lower pitched, respectively): contrabass clarinet (-2), bass clarinet (-1), alto clarinet (-7/12), "A" clarinet (-1/6), B flat clarinet (0), and the E flat

clarinet (+5/12). (An octave is the interval between one musical pitch and another with half or double its frequency).

There were many people who put the improvements to use, but one in particular was jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman. Benny was born into a poor Jewish family on May 30th, 1909, in Chicago, Illinois. The first time he picked up a clarinet was at the age of ten. At the age of 12, Benny appeared onstage imitating famous bandleader and clarinetist Ted Lewis. Benny made his first records as a leader of Ben Pollack's band and his influence is seen at the time of the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. The New Orleans Rhythm Kings were one of the most influential jazz bands of the early-to-mid 1920s. After leaving Chicago and moving to New York City, Goodman became a very successful and popular free-lancer, joining the likes of Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey in New York studios. In 1934 Benny put together his first big band with Gene Krupa on drums, who later gave him the nick name "The King of Swing". The "Swing Era" was born when Goodman added sophisticated arrangements by Fletcher Henderson. Over the next 50 years, Goodman spent his time recording and touring with international groups, including successful trips to Russia and the Far East. Additionally, he performed in many classical format concerts that received mixed reviews ([www.redhotjazz.com](http://www.redhotjazz.com)). Known by musicians for his stand-offish and "cheap" nature, many sidemen had a love/hate relationship with Goodman.

Many musicians claimed that Benny was dishonest when it came time to pay off the band and many more recalled the Goodman "ray", the dirtiest of looks received when a mistake was made. That aside, it's clear that without

Goodman the “ Swing Era” would have been nowhere near as strong when it became, if it came at all. After his death, the Yale University library received most Benny Goodman’s private never-before-heard recordings and rare unpublished photos. Another large influence to the “ Swing Era” was famous clarinetist Arthur Jacob Arshawsky, better known as Artie Shaw. (Originally, he called himself Art Shaw but was told that the name sounded like a sneeze.) Born on May 23, 1910, in New York, New York, he was the only child of Jewish immigrants from Russia and Austria. Artie was a leading bandleader and jazz performer, even being referred to as the King of the Clarinet.

He first started getting serious about playing music at age 13 when he took up the saxophone. Around the age of 15, he quit school to learn to become a better musician. Later, at age 16, he started with the clarinet. Shaw listened to several jazz greats including Louis Armstrong as an attempt to improve his own playing. He listened and learned about the works of classical composers Igor Stravinsky and Claude Debussy. About 1935, when Artie Shaw was invited to participate at a swing concert at the Imperial Theatre, he put together a band, consisting of a string quartet and a rhythm section, and composed a special piece for the event: Interlude in B Flat. His band gave one of the night’s greatest performances, and the audience was exuberant about their song. Reworking the music of Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, and Jerome Kern, Shaw made these classically based standards into swing. He scored his first big success in 1938 with his version of Porter’s Begin the Beguine.

As you can see, the clarinet had to undergo many changes, has several “spin-offs”, and has a wide classical and jazz history. Several different keys were added over the years. Ranging from soprano to octocontrabass, the clarinet has been a very successful woodwind instrument and has had very successful performers.

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