

## PRESS REVIEW

# LOUIS SCLAVIS

### **Chatter with Louis Sclavis**

*How did you discover the clarinet?*

I began my interest through a Harmonie band (amateur concert band) in Lyon which had clarinets, saxophones, horns and so on. In every French town there were such a band which played music from opera and some popular music. I began to learn with a teacher from this band in my home town of Lyon. I would have liked to play the flute, but there was only a clarinet teacher so I said OK, I just wanted the chance to play!

My parents were not especially musical though there was always music in my house as my parents liked to dance. Then afterwards I went to study in Lyon; this was the end of the 1960s with the start of the free jazz era so I immediately began to play this style of music. It was a very good period as every kind of arts was mixed together - the time of the living theatre. The free music from the United States, and bands like the Soft Machine were very important; it was on the edge of the pop and the free jazz music.

*So you really played the clarinet because it was the only instrument available?*

Yes, and afterward I chose the bass clarinet. I just heard that it existed, and I thought the sound of the bass clarinet would be very exciting, one octave lower than the clarinet. I had never really heard it before but I bought a bass clarinet and it was exactly what I needed to make my music. You can be a singer, a tenor, a sax, or a cello... you can be many things, because the instrument is on the border of many things. My music is not typical jazz or pop or classical, so the bass clarinet was just what I needed.

*It is clear in your improvising workshops that your music encompasses so many different styles; when composing do you write down your improvisation?*

When I compose for one of my new projects I use the piano. I don't compose a long piece, I just need to have perhaps eight bars of good music. What is important is to bring something very strong to the improvisation. Sometimes you can write something very beautiful but it doesn't work well for the improvisation. With the right material the musician can bring something special to the work becomes more and more sophisticated. But when I write for the movie or theatre I like to write it out, not improvise.

Andrew Roberts  
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### **The music of Louis Sclavis**

The spring 2007 issue of *Clarinet & Saxophone* featured an interview with Louis Sclavis. He had been in London to lead the Semler Clarinet Academy in October 2006. Sclavis is a relatively infrequent visitor to the UK and consequently has a low profile in this country; he is however something of a giant on the busy European scene.

My first encounter with the music of Louis Sclavis came in 1994 when I heard a broadcast from the Bath Festival. He had been performing music from his latest CD release *Acoustic Quartet*. I was struck by the astonishing virtuosity of his clarinet playing. Large sections of the music sounded improvised but the music was tightly structured and had a sound-world like nothing I heard before. This was time prior to the emergence of the websites such as Amazon, and it was not until I took a trip to Paris that I discovered that he was already beginning to accumulate a large catalogue of recordings.

Sclavis was born in Lyon, France in 1953 and the earliest available recordings of his music date back to the early 1980s. *Ad Augustia per Argustia* (1981) is a largely solo album containing a fascinating and often amusing set of improvisations played on clarinet, bass clarinet, and soprano saxophone. The innovation shown in these pieces immediately marks him out as being a musician who would tread his own path. Sclavis is somewhat unique among clarinet players today in that he plays only his own music. Michel Portal, his French compatriot, is somewhat similar to Sclavis in that he has also explored an innovative non-classical route. However, Portal has always had the reputation as renowned classical player of the mainstream clarinet repertoire as well as being a noted player of contemporary music. Another early Sclavis album, *Rencontres* (1985) shows off his improvisational skills, but this time in an ensemble context with the clarinet as the lead player. By now Sclavis had developed his identity with the three instrument that he played : namely clarinet, bass clarinet, and soprano saxophone, and never any other kind of clarinet and saxophone. Throughout his career he has kept this identity of only playing these three instruments. However it is the bass clarinet which dominates his music, and it is an instrument with which he is now particularly associated. The early recordings of Sclavis owe a lot of the free improvisation scene from which he had emerged and this has been an area to again throughout his recording career.

After recording the album *Clarinettes* (1985) Sclavis won the Prix Django Reinhardt, an prize given to the best jazz musician in France. This album is almost entirely devoted to multitracked playing and is a showcase for the talents of Sclavis as a clarinet player. On hearing this album for the first time I was struck by the variety of sounds that he is able to produce. This is an ideal recording for anyone interested in listening to the music of Sclavis for the first time. A similar album is *Trio de Clarinettes* (1991), which is a live recording from Berlin where Sclavis is joined by the clarinetists Jacques Di Donato and Armand Angster. On this album, Sclavis has been described as being an orchestrator of jazz which is so intricate and full of details that it's difficult to imagine it as improvisation at all. The addition of Angster playing contra-bass clarinet on this album adds an extra dimension and produces some wonderful sounds when the low instruments play together.

Sclavis is a musician who is continually working on new projects with different players. This is perhaps what makes his music sound so fresh and innovative.

There are however certain instrumentalists who have appeared on a number of his recordings over the years. *Chine* (1987), *Chamber Music* (1989) and *Ellington on the Air* (1992) are three of his earlier recordings where he had begun to establish a close relationship with some of these players.

By 1992 Sclavis had come to the attention of the respected German label ECM and that year he recorded his first album for them. *Rouge* (1992) is for a quintet of his regular collaborators who had played on some of his previous recordings. Sclavis has gone on to record a further six albums for the ECM label, each one for a different set of players. Another of Sclavis's long established musical relationships had been with Italian drummer Aldo Romano, and French double bass Henri Texier. Their three recordings : *Carnet de Routes* (1995), *Suite Africaine* (1999), and *African Flashback* (2005) have been inspired by the music of Africa and have all been produced with the extensive accompanying photo booklets taken from their tours through remote parts of Africa, prior to the recording of the respective albums.

Another aspect of Sclavis's music besides free improvisation and clarinet-led ensembles is his association with more traditional French folk music. His *Danses et Autres Scènes* (1997) is a set of miniature pieces for solo and various small ensembles. This is an album which is far removed from the exuberant excesses of some of his previous music, and is quintessentially French and very approachable. Sclavis has released a number of albums in this vein, including the delightful *Dans la Nuit* (2002) for clarinets, violin, cello, percussion, and accordion. This was written as a music to accompany the silent film by Charles Vanel. Sclavis has, in fact, written other music for film on several occasions, notably on the soundtrack album *Ça Commence Aujourd'hui* (1999) for the film by Bertrand Tavernier. Again this is very approachable music and is so typical of French cinema.

One of Sclavis's most successful recent albums was *Napoli's Walls* (2003). This was for a diverse quartet including the multi-talented Médéric Collignon, who plays toy trumpet, electronics and percussion. Collignon also possesses an amazingly adaptable voice, which is utilised to produce some remarkable vocal effects. The music on *Napoli's Walls* is inspired by aspects of Italian music and also the paintings of the French artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest who painted public pictures in the city of Naples between 1987 and 1995. A focal point to this album is a memorable operatic-styled track which is introduced by Sclavis on clarinet.

His most recent recording is another ECM release *L'Imparfait des Langues* (2007) for a new different quintet. Sclavis now appears to be keen to promote new and younger talent on his various recording projects. As well as Sclavis on his trademark instruments, this quintet adds alto saxophone, guitar, keyboards, and drums. An interesting feature of this album is that the tracks are interspersed with four solo interludes played by Sclavis on the bass clarinet, each of which based on a different blowing technique.

I have had the opportunity of seeing Sclavis play live on a number of occasions in the UK and abroad. He does not often play in Britain, although he has been a frequent visitor to the Bath International Festival. There is a website, [www.sclavifansite.jp](http://www.sclavifansite.jp), which is run from Japan and contains up to the date details of his tour dates which are predominantly

in mainland Europe. By looking at the site, you will see that he is a busy and well travelled musician. If you happen to be in the vicinity of any of his concerts, I highly recommend that you try to hear him play.

Scalvi is a musician who is continually exploring new boundaries, with improvisation at the heart of his music. His technical command of the clarinet is nothing short of breathtaking with so-called 'extended techniques' incorporated as a natural part of his playing. He is a master in circular breathing and slap tongue, and will explore any sounds that the clarinet is able to produce. When I have seen him perform this has included playing the bass clarinet trumpet-like through the neck with the mouthpiece removed. I have also seen him use a technique where he rotates the neck of the bass clarinet 180° with the mouthpiece removed. He then 'plays' the instrument. A close microphone is then positioned at the rotated neck to amplify the different pitched resonances that are produced. He is without question one of the most pioneering clarinet players alive today, and I recommend that anybody with an interest in the clarinet should explore his music.

Andrew Smith

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