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BASSOONISTS Get DOWN and DIRTY

BY ROB CAMPBELL

It's a common problem when orchestral musicians go to parties: the rest of the musicians are ignored, standing at the edges of the crowd like wallflowers, while the groupies flock around the bassoonists. "The bassoonists get all the chicks," says a second fiddle. "It's not fair," a clarinetist pipes up. The French horns discuss separating to go to another party (knowing in their hearts it will be no different), while the conductor thinks: "Nobody knows the Trebles I've seen."

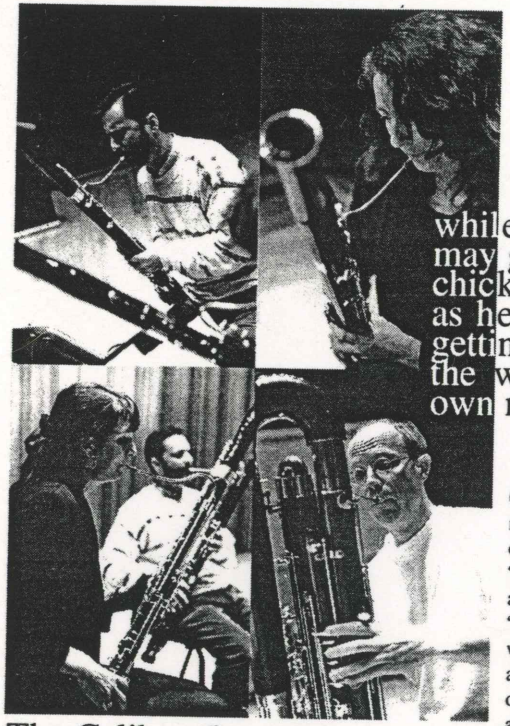
But, there's scoring, and then there's scoring, and while bassoonists may get all the chicks, they sure as heck aren't getting much in the way of their own music. Tchaikovsky's "Violin Concerto in D Major" was, inexplicably, written for the violin, while Mozart's Piano Concertos rely heavily upon pianos; and although Dvorák remembered the cello on occasion, the bassoon appears to have slipped his mind.

Such a state, however, is destined not to last. The bassoon is a dangerous looking instrument, resembling a grenade launcher with a metal straw attached, and it was just a matter of time before someone realized that whoever is wielding one can pretty well dictate his own terms ("Alright, put down the music sheet and step away from the piano.") If you get four bassoonists together dressed in black leather jackets and berets, you've got a musical tactical strike force.

You've also got The Caliban Quartet, featuring four of Canada's top bassoonists dedicated to reclaiming the musical field.

"If bassoonists can't commission or blackmail a composer," says Fraser Jackson, "they will more than likely arrange something themselves." Fraser is a Contrabassoonist who denies any involvement with the Iran-Contra arms deals, but does admit to having been an active agent in the formation of the Caliban Quartet.

The Caliban Quartet has made a specialty of appropriating non-traditional bassoon pieces, like Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" or Lennon and McCartney's "Oh! Darling." In their album, *BassOOnatics!*, they range from Duke Ellington ("Caravan"), through Stravinsky and Sibelius. It is, in fact, from Sibelius that they get their name. Caliban, of course, was the strange, fishy monster in



The Caliban Quartet

Photo by Anand Maharaj

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Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who, having originally owned the island Prospero now rules, desperately wants to have it back: "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother," he complains over his dinner. Sibelius wrote a collection of orchestral music for a 1925 production of *The Tempest* and his "Caliban's Song" reflects the creature's determination to win back his island. Fraser, who adapted the piece for bassoon, says that "it communicates some of the traits of Caliban which led the Quartet to adopt his name." At least that's the official version. "Actually," says Fraser in a more candid moment, "everybody in the quartet wanted a different name and 'Caliban' was the only one we could all agree on." There are, however, similarities, he insists, between the Shakespearian monster and the band: "like the bassoon, Caliban is dark, low, unruly, aspiring, earthy and, often unintentionally, humorous."

Not that I'll believe *anything* this group does is unintentional — including its humour. Fraser Jackson plays with the Toronto Symphony and teaches at the University of Toronto and the Royal Conservatory of Music. His wife, Nadina Mackie Jackson, is also an instructor at the university and spent more than a decade as second bassoonist of the Montreal Symphony and principal bassoonist with the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra.

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Kathleen McLean is the current Associate Principal Bassoonist of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and, among other credentials, is also a frequent guest artist at the Vancouver Chamber Music Festival. Christopher Millard would appear to be in a bit of a rut, having been the Principal Bassoonist for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra *and* the CBC Vancouver Orchestra since 1975 (the year Jimmy Hoffa disappeared and Patty Hearst reappeared.) They are joined by percussionist Mark Duggan.

These really *are* among the top of their field in the country, and if they want to play Ellington's "Caravan" or a Stravinsky tango — well, I'm certainly not going to interfere.

Their CD is surprisingly long (71 minutes and 12 seconds), and has garnered praise from every corner. David Lasker of *The Globe and Mail* describes their sound as having a "dark, chocolaty, nutty texture," while Bernard Garfield, Principal Bassoonist for The Philadelphia Orchestra, praises their "excellent intonation, brilliant technique" and "variety of repertoire." Rick Phillips of CBC Radio's Sound Advice gives it "the full five stars," and an unidentified eight-year-old at the Harbourfront Cafe calls it "the funniest thing I've ever heard."

There are also several opportunities to catch them live, including special "Cushion Concerts" for children 5 to 12 which include a narrated story with music, *Darwood's Wild Bassoon*, written by Fraser with sets by Nadina.

This is simply wonderful music, ranging from jazzy to comical to awesome. It is also rather dangerous and subversive in as much as it may just bring back the idea that excellent musicianship should, theoretically, play an important role in music. Q

The Caliban Quartet will be playing at The Great Hall on Queen Street West on July 21 at 7:30 pm.