

Les Craven, principal clarinet with Welsh National Opera, tells the story of the different instruments he has used over the years and how he eventually abandoned wood in favour of hard rubber clarinets



An alternative TO WOOD

I started playing clarinet aged seven on a rosewood simple-system E flat clarinet with no maker's name, then later on a Hawkes and Sons E flat, also simple system. Next I had a French simple-system Couesnon C clarinet, then my first B flat, a metal, silver-plated Clinton-system clarinet which, at some stage in its life, had been owned by Charles Draper. At least that's what I was led to believe, as it had Charles Draper's name on the side of the instrument. I later discovered that Draper used to have these military instruments stamped to show he had approved them.

At the age of ten I changed to Boehm system, and my parents bought me a B flat and an A made by Selmer (the B flat a 'Centred Tone' model, favoured by Benny Goodman, the A a Series 9, the latest model at the time). I won a Junior Exhibition with them to attend the Royal Academy of Music Junior Department, and was subsequently invited to play in rehearsal with the London Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Colin Davis.

After studying with Christopher Ball at the Royal Academy Juniors and later with Sidney Fell at the Royal College of Music, I auditioned for and won a trial for first clarinet with the

My experience is that in cold conditions, hard rubber clarinets warm up more quickly than wooden instruments but remain more stable in terms of tuning

BBC Welsh Orchestra aged 19. I won my first permanent principal clarinet job aged 21, and much later became a session musician and guest principal clarinetist, performing and recording with the major London orchestras. Today, the position I have held for 23 years with the Welsh National Opera still requires hours of personal practice and orchestral rehearsal on a daily basis. This, at the age of 63, takes its physical toll, so I am very conscious of ergonomics and economy of effort in playing.

I originally bought some Ridenour hard rubber clarinets (not synthetic or composite material but pure, solidified rubber) to keep as a spare set for when my Leblanc Opus clarinets were being serviced or when I had to play in outdoor situations. These days I use them more and more, and over the years they have seen much service in many operas and also on TV concerts where heat from studio lights could badly affect the wood of my Leblanc clarinets. Rubber clarinets cope with climate extremes very well, and touring to hot countries, I feel safer with these hard rubber clarinets than with my wooden pair.