

The Recorder Magazine

Glen Shannon – Featured Composer – Winter 2023

This issue, we have invited Glen Shannon to write a new work for TRM centre spread. He has presented *Albion's Elixer*, a quartet for ATTB.

Glen is based near San Francisco, California where he is a member of the East Bay Recorder Society and is Co-Director of the Barbary Coast Recorder Orchestra. His love of straightforward, approachable music for the recorder has won him several prizes in composition contests since 1997, including the Chicago and Washington DC Recorder Societies, the American Recorder Society, and the former Amsterdam Loeki Stardust Quartet. Members of the former Flanders Recorder Quartet, Tom Beets and Joris Van Goethem, have commissioned works from him for their advanced-level “Air Force” workshops in the UK and Northern Europe. Tom and Joris recently commissioned Glen to write a Bass-Contrabass duet, “Slingshot”, that they recorded for their first CD as the duo FR2.

Glen is active in the American Recorder Society as editor of the quarterly Members' Library Editions, a series introducing new recorder music to the worldwide membership. He is also the editor and producer of the annual ARS Play-the-Recorder-Month piece that appears with the Winter edition of the American Recorder magazine. In October 2021, Glen received the ARS Presidential Special Honor Award, recognising a person who has had a significant positive impact on the recorder community in North America.

How did you get into playing the recorder?

At my public school, we all learned recorder in 3rd grade, as a musical aptitude litmus test of sorts, and those who passed were invited to play a “real” instrument in the 4th grade band. I took to it immediately, even though we only learned the first-octave scale the entire year (low C to middle C on a descant).* At the end of the year, when they demonstrated all the possible band instruments, I chose to play the clarinet because it seemed to have the greatest range and therefore the fewest limitations. I played clarinet all through high school and even through university marching band, but despite having fleet fingers, the instrument was tiring on my face and I could never get that beautiful, pure clarinet sound. I kept the recorder by my side throughout, because I could always get a nice sound with no facial fatigue at all. And no reeds to worry about.

*When I was 10 I came across a recorder fingering chart for the first time, and discovered that ALL the notes were possible on the recorder, and my little boy brain exploded! I especially loved that the recorder had no keys and required fun finger combinations to get the chromatics.

Which composers or musical style have been your influences as a composer?

The short answer: Baroque music was my first inspiration – and fugues in particular. To expound: The piece that sparked my interest in composing was a school band arrangement of something by Vivaldi that was simply called “Concerto Grosso”, when I was about 12. (Years later I found it to be the *Adagio e spiccato* section and *Allegro* fugue from his Concerto no. 11 for 2 violins in D minor from *L'Estro Armonico*, RV 565, also arranged for organ by JS Bach.) I was playing the Bb bass clarinet on the continuo line and started to think, “I would like to try to write something fun like this.” I discovered JS Bach’s organ music, especially the preludes & fugues, which were available at the public library, and pored over them. Bach’s patterns and sequences, like in the Vivaldi fugue, were comforting and immediately satisfying, and the mathematic perfection they showed in the

counterpoint was inspiring. Bach taught me the construction of a fugue, the main lesson being that I could always put in the subject again if I was stuck for ideas, and eke out another 4-8 measures. In later years I have come to love Renaissance consort music and 16th-century polyphony and have recently composed some pieces in that style. I also really enjoy the contemporary recorder music of composers like Stephen Watkins, Sören Sieg and Matthias Maute – it's clever and difficult but not impossible, and very rewarding for the effort.

Does the recorder have any special quality or color for you that is different to other wind instruments?

When a consort of Renaissance recorders play together, the pure tempered harmonies are so beautiful and rich with overtones, which modern wind instruments don't seem to have in their sound, or even in the music they were designed to play. Especially at the larger 8-foot pitch an octave lower, the warm sound of a matched recorder consort is unlike any other instrument.

What are you listening to at the moment? Have there been any works, historical or contemporary that have captivated you?

My current pieces are the famous Queen of the Night aria "Der Hölle Rache" from Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, so much so that when I noticed the vocal line exactly matches the range of an F recorder, I arranged it for sopranino solo with recorder orchestra, and the Barbary Coast RO will be performing it at our annual concert in March. The second piece I absolutely adore is the first movement *Prélude: Vivement* of Telemann's Paris Quartet no. 10 in B minor. The interplay of the three soloists in that movement is just a riot and the aggressive writing is striking. I also play traverso, and this movement always gives me a good workout. In contemporary music I can never get enough of Matthias Maute's "Les barricades", I have been playing it for years and use it for both concert material and practice drills to keep my fingers in shape.

How to you overcome the problem of writing well-balanced music for recorders, music that is both accessible, but entertaining?

Every recorder size has its own personality, strengths and weaknesses, and I strive to make the most of the strengths. I consider a piece to be like a conversation, with however many independent but equal participants discussing a topic and coming to a consensus. Every part should have something meaningful to say, and be given the opportunity to say it. Usually the music tells me what to do, once it's at a certain point in development. On the technical side, it's important to avoid bad finger combinations, weak notes on strong gestures, or fast, crazy activity outside the comfort zone of the particular size (or person) it's written for. As a publisher, I also keep the players in mind, who may be getting together for a first reading, and want to underscore here that good typesetting and properly placed page turns are likewise critical to having the music ingestible at sight.

My pieces go through a fairly obsessive process to come out appearing as if they were birthed fully formed, which can be far from the truth. Many times the final piece is quite a distance from the original idea. My method usually starts with improvising around on the instrument and trying to capture any passing ideas that have potential for development, before they disappear. I also keep notebooks of ideas, and frequently start projects by perusing them. Eventually I'll have something sewn together with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end, which I call the "lump of clay", as a sculptor might. Once there's a rough entity that can stand on its own, so to speak, I set it aside. When I come back to it later, it's all "new" again and this is when the detail work begins. I respond to it with fresh ideas for improving, reorganizing, rejecting, and the like. Finally it reaches the point where I can listen in its entirety without having anything raise a brow. At that point it is "finished" —

Ha! but even then, a month or two later I might have a new solution to something in the piece that would make it even better. If the piece is already published by then, I have to decide how to handle that, case by case.

You've written a number of pieces for recorder orchestra – what challenges are there in writing orchestrally for recorders, as opposed to small ensembles?

Writing for recorder orchestra can actually be easier in some ways than smaller ensembles, because I get to sprawl out and there's always the next size recorder available above or below, which might be better suited for a particular idea. I don't have to make as many compromises, and it's not as confining. Smaller ensembles are more demanding in that regard, because they have limited forces available to present a full-scale musical image, and every detail is exposed. In orchestral writing, having more parts allows textural techniques that aren't possible otherwise, for example outlining the melody in multiple octaves, grouping adjacent sizes together to bring out an important statement in a richer unison, or adding supportive layers of rhythmic weaving using *divisi* among the same size. However, precisely because recorders can all sound the same in a large group, the layers can be lost without special treatment and the audience in turn can be lost, too.

Do you have any advice for players when approaching "Albion's Elixir"? What is the story behind the title?

"Albion's Elixir" is a fun title created with your UK readers in mind. I like the imagery it evokes of a musical magic potion written especially for England, which I'm sure all Brits know was once called Albion (at least according to Shakespeare). The piece is a dense little concoction, comprised of three iterations of a layered motive around the exposed leap of a 5th, perhaps a hunting call or an invocation of magical spirits, with a brief episode in between that modulates to a new key. In each iteration, a different voice makes the first leap and the countermelodies are reassigned. Players will readily see the tied syncopations, and will recognize the 3+3+2 kind of rhythmic groupings common in Renaissance polyphony and in so much other music.

As many of our readers are UK-based, can you describe the activities of the American Recorder Society?

The American Recorder Society is experiencing an increase in membership and activity, especially online activity since the pandemic shut down in-person playing together. As the editor of the Members' Library Editions, which comes with each issue of the *American Recorder* magazine and corresponds to your Centre Spread, I know that we now offer members downloadable web versions of each featured piece, complete with separate parts if warranted, plus play-along recordings with each part missing. These recordings are usually produced by me personally, though we have a couple members who do very well in the recording department – most notably Victor Eijkhout, a fellow composer who went to London as a finalist in the recent SRP composition competition. In fact, Victor is the composer of this year's Play-the-Recorder Month piece, "Quo Vadis?", to be performed across the country on Play-the-Recorder Day, an annual event taking place on 18 March 2023. There will be a Zoom interview with Victor, and professional player Emily O'Brien will present a multi-track performance video of the piece for viewers to play along with. We have also upgraded our website and increased our presence in social media thanks to Jennifer Carpenter, a former national board member who is now our official Marketing Manager, as well as maintain a YouTube channel "americanrecordermag" with instructional videos done by many of our professional players. We currently have 113 chapters ("branches"), including a nascent fully online-only chapter called the North American Virtual Recorder Society, or NAVRS, directed by Rachel Begley, coincidentally an

English native. NAVRS fills a much-needed niche for isolated or beginning players who do not have a local ARS chapter near them but still enjoy being part of the recorder community.

More information is available on Glen's website: www.glenshannonmusic.com. As well as self-publishing, Glen's work is also available through Moeck Verlag, PRB Productions, Loux Music Publishing Company, and the American Recorder Society. Performances of some of his works can be found on YouTube at www.youtube.com/glenshannon.

Information on the American Recorder Society can be found at: www.americanrecorder.org