

“Treebeard’s voice”

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“Hrum, Hoom’ murmured the voice, a deep voice like a very deep woodwind instrument.”

I have always been particularly struck with this comparison of Treebeard’s voice. It might be thought, to start with, that the natural simile that would occur to most authors, would be that provided by the deep pedal notes of the organ. Tolkien might, perhaps, have thought that this was too obvious, or too hackneyed a comparison to use, or that it would suggest the presence of a building or buildings, and so be inappropriate in a forest context.

What kind of instrument, then, did Tolkien have in mind and how did the comparison occur to him? Treebeard’s characteristic “hoom, hom” provides a kind of onomatopoeic impression of the instrumental sound suggested; the nearest equivalent that I can think of is the lower compass of the clarinet, sometimes called its ‘chalumeau’¹ register, and still more, of the bass clarinet. The normal bass of the woodwind section of the orchestra is provided by bassoons (sometimes with the addition of a double bassoon) but the characteristic bassoon sound is something else (more of a ‘honk’ than a ‘hoom’ to put it crudely - I hope any bassoonist readers will forgive me!).

Tolkien was presumably thinking in terms of his recollection of music to which he had actually listened, and notably, he did express a particular liking for the music of Carl Maria von Weber. Now Weber (1786 to 1826 - a younger contemporary of Beethoven) coming a quarter of a century or so after Mozart had provided the clarinet with the two most familiar and often played items in its repertory,² was a major contributor to that repertory; as a result of his friendship with an early virtuoso of the instrument, Heinrich Bärmann, he wrote a number of works, including two concertos for it, and its characteristic tone-colour suffuses much of his music in general. This is especially so in *Der Freischütz* (1821), the most famous of Weber’s operas, and the only one (apart from the overtures) that Tolkien is likely to have had the opportunity of hearing complete³. In the introduction of the overture there occurs a celebrated passage where the tone-colour of clarinets at the bottom of their range, surrounded by a haze of tremolando strings evokes the depths of the forest that forms the opera’s setting, and frames the motive of Samiel, the Demon Huntsman who haunts the forest. Just before this, at the start of the overture, the peaceful landscape bordering on the forest is suggested by the rich sound of four horns - another favourite tone colour of Weber’s, and another instrumental counterpart of Tolkien’s imaginative world with its constant references to the sound of horns. Boromir’s horn could claim an ancestor in the knight Huon’s horn in Weber’s last opera *Oberon*, which has a similar power of sounding over vast distances, and which starts off, and is prominent in, the overture, a well known piece which Tolkien probably knew.

The reference in the opening chapter of *The Hobbit* to ‘clarinets’ brought and played by two of the dwarves, (Bifur and Bofur) is rather remarkable. It does not seem to have attracted comment up to now, but the appearance of ‘clarinets’ here is something of an anachronism, just as the ‘cold chicken and tomatoes’ was before it was changed. The ensemble is clearly meant to be one of ‘old’ instruments, judging by the reference to ‘little fiddles’⁴ and ‘viols as big as themselves’ (the bass viol is the ancestor of the modern double-bass). Tolkien of course was writing long before the

revival of interest in old and ‘period’ instruments generally got under way, but the clarinet as we know it is a relative newcomer to the instrumental scene; it seems to have been invented or ‘evolved’ about 1710, and was only starting to come into general and frequent use near the end of the eighteenth century⁵; Mozart himself was only able to write for it on the occasions when players were available. It looks as if the clarinet must have had a special sort of resonance for Tolkien; its positioning in the ‘Hobbit’ ensemble seems to show that he thought of it as of middle-to-low compass, just above the ‘viols’.

What is true of the clarinet in this context, is still more so of the bass clarinet⁶, which came into regular use later in the nineteenth century, for instance in Wagner’s schemes of orchestral tonepainting, in *The Ring*, where a number of passages feature it prominently, and most famously in *Tristan und Isolde* in the accompaniment to King Marke’s long monologue in the second act. It is known that Tolkien did attend (with C S Lewis) a performance (possibly more than one) of one or other of the Ring operas at Covent Garden; there is no evidence that he heard *Tristan und Isolde* or knew the passage mentioned above, but it is just possible⁷. Of course in the Treebeard reference he was no doubt harking back to a collective memory of various works or passages from them that he had heard at various times, rather than thinking of any one individual piece or passage. The appropriate counterpart of Treebeard’s voice might really be an instrument of even lower compass, a contrabass clarinet, in other words. Such an instrument does in fact exist, though its use is extremely rare. It might indeed have developed, says Mr del Mar⁸, as the bass of the woodwind section of the orchestra as a whole, although in the event it did not. But if one may be permitted, in conclusion, to pass in imagination beyond this earthly sphere, and speculate on the possibility of a great cycle of LOTR operas, (dwarfing Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*), libretti by J R R Tolkien, music by Weber, a contrabass clarinet, or even two or three of the monsters, would come in very handy. And not for Treebeard only; the traversals of Moria and Khazad-dum, and the pass of Cirith Ungol, and many other episodes, are clearly going to require all the resources of the vast orchestra that presumably will be available.

Notes

1. The ‘chalumeau’ was an instrument akin to the clarinet, but of lower compass; it evolved about the same time, but the development of the clarinet superseded it. See *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. ed. S Sadie (MacMillan 1980 vol. 4 pp 1112.

2. The Clarinet Quintet K581 and the Clarinet Concerto K622.

3. It was given in Oxford in circa 1927 as the first production of the Oxford University Opera Club. Another performance (concert) was given in Oxford in 1953 when the conductor was a then unknown young man called Colin Davis. The present writer attended it.

4. Gypsy fiddles, perhaps. ‘Fiedel’ is the German equivalent; the usual German word for an orchestral violin is ‘Geige’. In Mahler’s 4th symphony (second movement) the leader (principal first violin) is directed to tune his instrument up a tone so as to produce a thin ‘scratchy’ sound, “wie ein Fiedel”.

5. ‘The New Grove’ dictionary, vol.4 pp 429-42.

6. For the use of the clarinet and bass clarinet in the orchestra in general, see Norman del Mar *Anatomy of the Orchestra* (Faber and Faber, paperback ed. 1983) pp 145-53 & 173-6.

7. There is a curious echo of the text of *Isolde*’s ‘Liebestod’ (the conclusion of *Tristan und Isolde*) in the description of Frodo at Rivendell listening to the Elvish singers and musicians and feeling that “an endless river of swelling gold and silver was flowing over him”, and that “it drenched and drowned him”.

8. del Mar, op cit p 153.