



ENTERTAINMENT &amp; ARTS

## Gary Gray Aims to Enliven Clarinet Music

BY LIBBY SLATE

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In 1967, when clarinetist Gary Gray left the St. Louis Symphony to become a teaching assistant at UCLA, he decided to try to break into the lucrative film and television recording industry.

A year went by without success, until Gray won UCLA's first Frank Sinatra Musical Performance Award. Then Sinatra himself phoned a Warner Bros. music contractor and told the man to hire Gray.

"I'd been bugging that contractor for work and he kept hanging up on me," Gray recalled with a smile. "So it was especially fun for me. My first film job was 'Bonnie and Clyde.' "

In the ensuing 20 years, Gray has carefully carved out a multifaceted career encompassing the playing of both classical and jazz clarinet and saxophone. He is co-principal clarinet of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, has been a featured soloist with numerous other ensembles, played hundreds of soundtracks and Sunday will become UCLA's first music faculty member to perform on Royce Hall's chamber music series.

Yet it is only recently, following the release of his own cassette/compact disc, that Gray has gained recognition outside the music world.

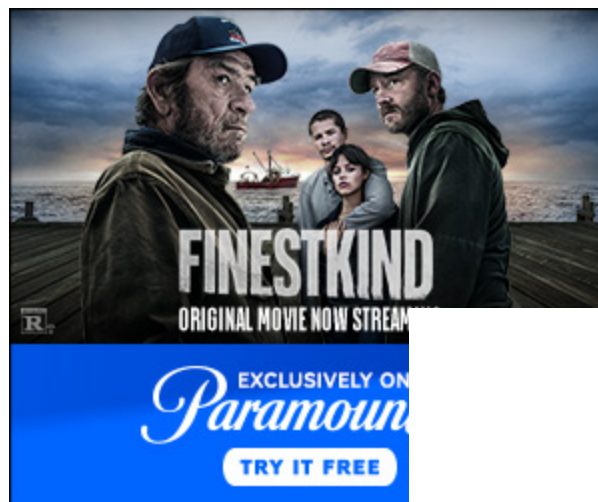
"The clarinet as a solo instrument has never been popular with audiences the way piano, violin and cello have," Gray said, before a scoring session at the Burbank Studios.

“It’s perceived more as a noodling instrument than as a melodic one, to play in bands or as background for dances.

“I’ve always been attracted to it in the melodic sense, though. I try to make it sing--and by that I mean thinking about the music, molding phrases as a singer would, making the music alive rather than dull--maybe because my father was a singer and the first music I was exposed to was vocal.”

With the exception of Benny Goodman and a few others like Eddie Daniels and Richard Stoltzman, there has been a dearth of clarinet recordings. Gray wants to fill the gap with his first solo release, “The Art of Gary Gray,” recorded with the Royal Philharmonic of London and featuring concertos by Aaron Copland and Malcolm Arnold and other works by Lutoslawski and Rossini. Only the Copland has been previously recorded.

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“I made a conscious effort to choose fresh repertoire,” Gray said. “The usual clarinet material--concertos by Mozart and Weber--has been done to death. These are popular performance pieces that had been unexplored on record.”

Whatever the medium, communicating the emotion of the music is of prime concern to Gray.

“It isn’t always easy to make the clarinet sing, because after all, it is a hunk of wood and buttons in your hands,” he said.

“In film scoring, it can be a challenge to play precisely and still try to give yourself emotionally 20 times in a row. That’s why chamber music is my favorite to play. It’s so personal, and so appreciated.”

At Royce Hall, Gray will perform with his Bravura Trio, whose other members are violist Milton Thomas and pianist Brooks Smith. “We chose the name because ‘bravura’ implies fire and spirit, and that’s the way we go at the music.

“The program will show the different sides of the clarinet,” Gray said. “Most of the music is optimistic, humanistic. But the Berg is dark, with nightmarish moments. It really grabs the audience.”

Gray hopes to follow the success of his cassette/CD with recordings and tours with the Bravura Trio, as well as solo tours. “I’m doing much more classical music than jazz now,” he said. “But I think the reason I’ve stayed fresh in my approach to making music and teaching after so many years is that I’ve done both classical and jazz with equal respect and equal enjoyment.

“I tell my students”--he teaches clarinet and saxophone and directs the UCLA Jazz Ensemble--“that playing in a small jazz combo is a lot like doing chamber music.

“You have to listen to each other and in doing so, you discover new parts of yourself, bring out the best in you.”

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