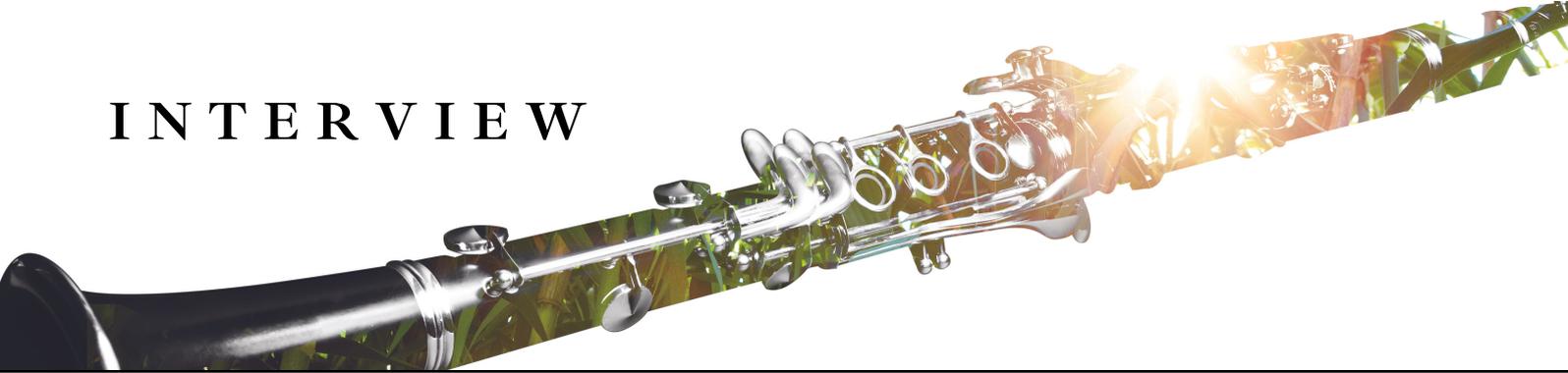


INTERVIEW



VANDOREN CLARINET MOUTHPIECES FOLLOWING THE EVOLUTION OF MUSICAL AESTHETICS

Vandoren is a manufacturer of reeds, mouthpieces and accessories for clarinet and saxophone. The company was founded in 1905 by Eugène Van Doren, father of Robert Van Doren and grandfather of Bernard Van Doren, current President of the company.

A French family business that perpetuates centuries-old traditions in the manufacturing of its products, while adapting to the challenges of innovation and to the needs of an environmental policy changing every day.

The 4th generation of the family made its debut in 2014 in the company with Robert Van Doren (namesake of his grandfather), son of Bernard Van Doren.

Since the 1980s, the mythical address of the Parisian showroom, located at 56 rue Lepic, right in heart of the famous district of Montmartre, welcomes musicians of all levels, students from conservatories as well as famous international soloists. On site, they benefit from personalized advice on the selection of their equipment and can take advantage of the trial studios for testing products and to consult the sheet music store.

For over a century, Vandoren has adapted its operation, its products, and its research to follow the ever changing musical aesthetic.

In this interview, we meet Jean-Louis René, musician tester at Vandoren Paris since 1981 and director of musical quality.



Which were the main clarinet mouthpiece models that helped follow the evolution of a certain musical aesthetic throughout the 20th century?

J-L.R. : The first iconic clarinet mouthpiece which is part of this dynamic of evolution is the 5RV, designed around 1935. Why this name? Because it is Robert Van Doren, its creator, who dedicated the initials of his first and last name. Then, in the early 1960's, the 5RV Lyre was designed, it is more open and has a longer table.

Then, in 1968, Bernard Van Doren created the B45, for which he constructs the name with the "B" of Bernard and 45 in reference to his year of birth (1945).

Finally, we can mention the B40, designed at the beginning of the 1980's, which has the same length of table and the same opening as the B45 and which will be the first large faceted mouthpiece, giving a compact and centered sound.

"We work with a system comprising emblematic models in the center and around, "satellite" mouthpieces"



How is the work organized to design a mouthpiece? Are there any clarinetists in particular who were involved in these developments?

J-L.R. : Everything is done in-house. Designing a mouthpiece takes teamwork. In the center of every project, Bernard Van Doren, two or three people who permanently work with the manager of the mouthpiece manufacturing section, and a musician who, according to the specifications, helps to guide to achieve a result that is as close as possible to this that is wanted. We then organize tests with selected artists that we know well, which avoids having too many different opinions. Never has a mouthpiece been made with one artist specifically. Expressing feelings is something difficult, only because of the precise vocabulary that must be used to understand the technical aspect. Additionally, a mouthpiece is always a story of compromise. In the course of product development, it is necessary to decide when we can be completely satisfied, because research can be infinite. The pursuit of excellence and quality constitute the DNA of Vandoren. We operate exactly the same way for the reeds.

In fact, we work with a system comprising: in the center, emblematic models (5RV, B45, BD5 for example), and around, "satellite" mouthpieces: we can say for example that the B40 is a satellite of the B45, then the B45 Lyre, which is long remained the most open classical mouthpiece in the catalogue, is a satellite of the B45. It is also the case for the Black Diamond family, for which the BD5 was first created, in 2015, to obtain a "dark sound", very popular in the USA. It is a very centered mouthpiece, very rich, with a great depth of sound. The BD4, a little bit more open and with a longer table length, was designed because some musicians wanted more timbre, clarity, and color in the sound. We can also mention the mouthpieces whose name begins with "M" (like "mouthpiece"), such as the M13, then the M13 Lyre, the M14 (which has been discontinued), the M15 and the M30 which is an extension of the more closed M15.

Regarding sales, the BD5 was very quickly adopted by customers. However, it took more time, for example, for the B40 to make itself known and adopted.



"A mouthpiece is always a story of compromise"

A precise knowledge and know-how are therefore necessary. How do you recruit and how do you train the younger generations?

J-L.R. : The role of management in any business is also to pass on this know-how, this experience, and this vocabulary is very specific to the young generation. New recruits in the factory are trained thanks to a long and meticulous training procedure, done step by step, in order to make them aware of not only the rigor, but the requirement and the adaptability that is necessary for example for finishing a mouthpiece (there is a large range of different finishes). In the factory, many people come from the agriculture industry, but there are also many engineers, people who have completed their specialized studies (for example studying some specific materials) and musicians too. Whatever the profile, people must be very rigorous and must know how to work as a team, because the priority of Vandoren has always been to maintain the world-renowned quality of its products, while making them evolve to serve the needs of musicians of all ages.

The research activity (needs of musicians, sound aesthetics, materials...) seems considerable. How is it organized?

J-L.R. : Research on materials is constant. As the original question concerns mouthpieces, let's talk about ebonite which, I remind you, and this is very important, is of course non-toxic! To give you an example of research on materials and its impact on sound aesthetics, let us compare the Black Diamond and B40 mouthpieces: they are from the same ebonite. However, they look different because Black Diamond mouthpieces are not polished, precisely to preserve this matte finish to make it match with sound characteristics of the mouthpiece (when you see the mouthpiece, it already gives a natural perception). An ebonite mouthpiece will always evolve over time, because saliva and different frictions will modify the ease of the emission of the sound. It will become a little more brilliant in tone over time as well. The development of a new mouthpiece will also rely on this fact: some mouthpieces were inspired by some features of older mouthpieces already in our catalogue. For example, in the case of the B40 Lyre, we have a freer blowing "B40".

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For everything else, our research and our development must answer all musicians! There exists for example many niche markets such as klezmer music, German or Austrian clarinet players. Thanks to the many meetings with musicians, we have been able to develop several mouthpieces and thus meet the specific demands of these niches. Let us note for example: the 13 series (440 Hz tuning fork, less brilliant sound), the W270 mouthpiece (Austrian clarinet) and German clarinet mouthpieces designed to be played with French cut reeds (BD5 D, M30 D, B40 D).

Finally, our research extends beyond the products as the machines of our factory were all designed and manufactured by Vandoren.

We are therefore actors of the incredible - and not less moving - path that goes from matter first (cane, ebonite) to the pleasure of the playing of the musician and to the emotion of the concert.

What advice(s) would you like to give to musicians to find the equipment they need?

J-L.R. : Our job is to kindle the curiosity of the musicians so that they do not lock themselves into something that is not good for them. We try to discuss with them and to reassure them.



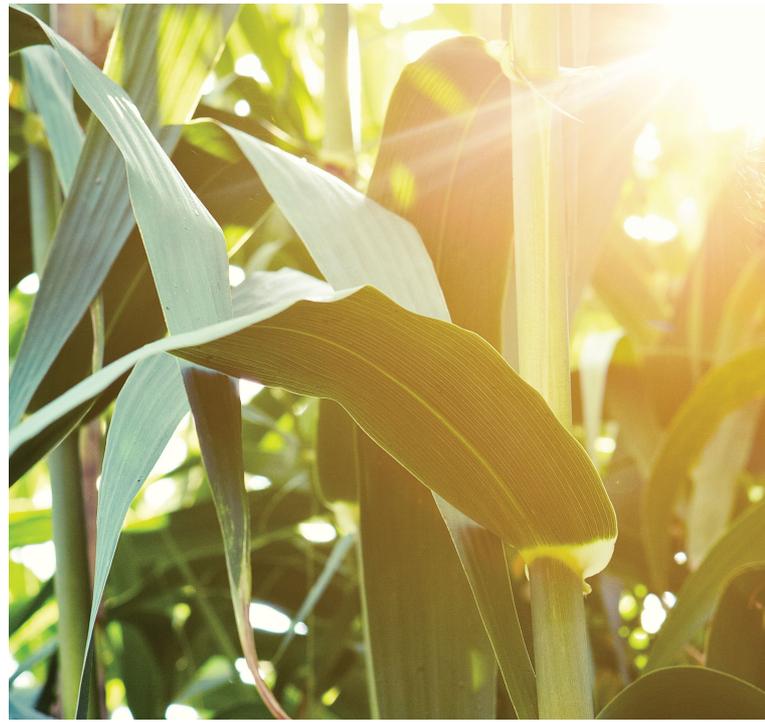
Concerning the reeds, when a musician is "between two strengths" and is not sure about what suits them, we suggest to them to discover other cuts (Traditional, V12, 56 rue Lepic or V21).

Many of them are unaware that the strengths are not exactly the same from cut to cut. It is obviously not a question of having the four cuts in the clarinet case! But you should know that they exist and that each of them can bring solutions in terms of comfort, for the search of a sound... We also encourage you to break in your reeds of a box and to rotate them (having for example 3 "easy" reeds, 3 others "stronger", etc...).

With regards to the mouthpieces, it is a question of finding various combinations in our catalogue which can match the needs of the musician in any opportunity. You have to be curious and try out equipment to be confident and reassured.

The ligature also plays its role: all our models are made so that the ligature lets the reed vibrate as naturally as possible. We propose models of metal ligatures, for a sound with more timbre and an easier emission, or models in leather or synthetic materials, for a less immediate response and for a dark and warmer sound.

Our latest ligature, in carbon fiber and therefore is extremely light, does not interfere with reed vibration. This exceptional product is part of our approach to innovation in materials.



How do you see the future?

J-L.R. : Vandoren is a company that has considerably developed since its creation in 1905. The machines have evolved a lot to meet the essential requirements for the quality of our products.

In the future, there will inevitably be new things in the clarinet world; we see the quality of musicians growing all over the world.

We are continuing our work whose goal is to exchange with musicians and to remain close to them. Related to our work research and our constant desire to development, this work allows us to propose today a very consistent catalogue and to have many leads for future development.

The environmental issue is essential. As we initially work in an agricultural industry (culture of the cane), we have always been interested in reducing the impact of each of our decisions on nature, and we will continue to enhance our know-how while adapting to the environmental issues in perpetual change, to better meet musicians expectations and allow them to live their passion fully.

