Clasax Victoria Podcast

Episode 10 - Morrie Backun
Backun Musical Services

Show notes

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Interview Transcript between Brendan Toohey and Morrie Backun:

BT: Hello and welcome.
You're listening to the 10th episode of the Clasax Victoria podcast. I'm your host, Brendan Toohey, and today I am very, very excited to be sitting down with an absolute legend of the clarinet world, Morrie Backun from Backun Musical Services.
I've been a big fan and admirer of Morrie and Backun accessories and clarinets for a very long time, and so, we're very lucky to have him here in Australia doing a tour. So, Morrie, I'll kick it over to you. Firstly, welcome to Australia.
MB: Thank you very much.
BT: G'day, I should say.
MB: G'day, it's my first time in Australia of a beautiful country. The only problem is when I go into a restaurant, I have no idea what the waiter was saying to me the other night. His accent was so, so thick, that it was an interesting challenge, but it's such a beautiful place and the people are so friendly. I'm really, yeah, we love it.
BT: We're so lucky to have you here.
MB: Thank you.
BT: So, I'm aware that we're somewhat pressed for time. I could speak to you for six hours easily, but just very quickly tell me your life story.
MB: You know, like my life story in just a couple of minutes. So I was, as most of us who were involved in music, I grew up as a student, and I was very serious about playing clarinet, in particular classical clarinet. And so, my goal was to actually become an orchestra player. And for a long time, I thought the orchestra I was really interested in was to try and play well enough that I could audition for the New York Philharmonic when the job opened. And hopefully win it.
BT: How did that pan out for you?
MB: Well, in retrospect, knowing what I know now,
if I would have known that then, I would have realized that the bar was set probably beyond what I ever could have reached. But ironically, the person who had the job when I was younger was Stanley Drucker, and he kept the job for 61 years. So, I don't think there would have been much chance of winning it. And ironically, now the principal New York Philharmonic is Anthony McGill, who's an amazing musician. And I'm proud to say, plays Backun equipment. So, in a way, a little piece of us is performing in the New York Philharmonic.
BT: You did end up there, in a way.
MB: In any case, on the stage for that.

BT: Beautiful. So, you were a young clarinetist growing up studying. How did you then get into manufacturing and things like that?
MB: So, when I was younger, I was always very interested in the mechanical side of this.
And ironically, I played clarinet and I played flute and to some degree saxophone,
although I seldom admit it publicly and it's nothing that anyone in the public would want to hear.
And I was always very, very fascinated by sound and tuning and mechanics. and really the instrument drew me in more and more, and I was particularly taken by the fact that flute players can play these incredibly difficult passages, seemingly with ease, you think of something difficult on a clarinet like Midsummer Night's Dream. Well, if a flute player plays it like it's a sight-reading exercise of whole notes. And I started thinking, well, their tongues aren't any faster, their fingers aren't any faster, how can it be. And I started studying mechanics and acoustics and engineering. And I was very good friends, basically almost life-long friends with Bick Brannen, who is the famous flute maker and Bick, [most people don't know because he was probably the most famous flute maker of the last 100 years, he and Albert Cooper together.] was a clarinetist and we many times, just casually in conversations like this we would talk about clarinets and why do clarinet players struggle with so many things? We started looking at all the mechanical things and one of my goals was to make an instrument that overcame an awful lot of the problems that we face as clarinet players, things like the register change. You know, if you talk to a flute player or an oboe player or even a bassoon player, trumpet player, they very seldom talk about register changes. They'll talk about higher notes or lower notes but we have this thing, and we actually go so far as to call it a break. You know, it kind of goes against intuitively what you would think music has. So, I had said that I wanted to try and come up with solutions. So, if you have a chance to visit Backun you'll see that you'll see that part of our facility, we have, for example, a full-time wood scientist.
My office is like an acoustics laboratory as well as an artist's grade workshop, where we do all these crazy experiments to just try and constantly move the needle. And some of it are simple things like the shape of a key to work, all the way up to things as sophisticated as we designed and patented the first carbon fibre. And I'm proud to say, Brendan, that you actually play them. And ironically, on this trip, finally the A clarinet you ordered a very long time ago was available.
BT: And it's here.
MB: It is here in real life, so it's the first pair in Australia.
BT: And, Morrie, I'm going to hand this to you to symbolically hand it back to me.
MB: And I don't think I want to. So, this instrument, interestingly, is carbon fibre on the outside but the wooden barrel and bell, all of the tone holes are actually wood, and the inside bore is wood.
So, it maintains that typical wooden resonance that people are familiar with. But it adds an element of strength and power, which is shocking. I think this is the only clarinet that if you were to take it into a large orchestra, you were playing something like a Mahler symphony. The brass section would be coming up and probably begging for sympathy so that they could be heard. The sheer power of this combination as quite extraordinary. But building them is an interesting challenge, technically, but.
BT: Right, oh, thank you.
MB: There you go.
BT: Thank you, it's like passing a sacred sword or something, you know?
MB: Something for you to pass on to your children and their children.
BT: Yeah. I've been loving it so far, and the B-flat as well.
MB: Well, you've been playing the B-flat for a while now.
BT: Yeah, yeah. At least six months.
MB: Yeah. So, you've noticed things like, as you're playing it, the pitch is just much more stable than usual, because the normal heating up and cooling down in the left hand, particularly on the clarinet. On this, it's a pretty much a thing in the past. Yeah. And as you warm up, the pitch doesn't change, but the sound gets bigger. It just blooms and blossoms.
MB: Bigger and bigger and bigger. I love it. Yeah. That was kind of the goal for that.
BT: So, Morrie, I have had a chance to go to Vancouver and I I visited your old factory, not where you are now. It was still in Burnaby. The year would have been 2012.
MB: Yeah, so from then to now, the new facility is much, much larger.

BT: I'll bet.
MB: And there is just a tremendous amount of new high-end equipment. We have our own wood conditioning facility, as well as the scientist who deals with that. We have now many, I think it's 13 CNC machines now, and some of them much bigger than when you would have been there with a lot of access.
BT: Well, I remember when I was there you were prototyping your first A clarinet. You hadn't released an A yet. So that kind of puts it in perspective how far as a company Backun has come, you guys have so many products now. It's amaing.
MB: Well, and you know, really two years ago, we launched the bass clarinets, which you know have really kind of changed the complexion of the clarinet world a little bit because we came up with two, one of them is a professional wooden instrument. And the other one is an affordable instrument made in synthetic, but frankly made to completely professional tolerances and we have a number of professionals who are playing those as well. But our goal was to create an instrument that was affordable, but that a professional could take and play the most demanding circumstances at the highest level. And so that that was really kind of a COVID project. You know, when we couldn't all be together, we could just have a small group of our engineering team and operations people to be working on things because bass clarinets are incredibly complicated in just the sheer number of parts, the complexity of putting them together, the machinery to make the bodies has to be larger, the cutters, the symmetry needs to be different, the whole style of making them.
BT: Wow. It's okay if you can't answer this or are not allowed to answer this.
MB: Sure.
BT: Or don't want to answer this. Are there plans for Backun E-flat clarinet at some stage down the line?
MB: There is.
BT: Oh, amazing!
MB: So a number, a number of our artists play E-flat as well. And I'm thinking in particular of a few, Jessica Phillips from the Metropolitan Opera who's a beautiful, beautiful player on any instrument, but on E-flat is virtuosic, has for a number of years been very patiently asking. In Europe, Javier Lopez, for an example, who's a, I just think he's one of the great E-flat players in the world. I made a prototype E-flat for him and he's been pushing me to finish it and do it. And actually, it was my intention to get the E-flat finished last year and then the C this year but the success of the bass clarinet put us behind because frankly, we've exceeded our original goals on bass clarinet by over 1000%. So, we not only had to design all of the tooling and equipment, but we then had to drastically increase the amount and hire more people, all of which takes training and time to do. But yes, my hope is that the E-flats will be out later this year or next year as well.
BT: Amazing.
MB: And the plan is that we will do three, So, we will do in anything we do one of my goals is I want people to be successful when they start the instrument. So, our student or affordable instruments are made to the same quality matrix as our professional. So, there will be an Alpha E flat.
So yes, for those of you that double or play in musical pit or theatre or amateur orchestra or professionals playing outside, there will be a Q [series] which is kind of your most popular professional grade instrument and there will, in fact be a Lumiere and I'm sure someone will say, 'can't you do a carbon fibre?', so we'll see about that one. But yes, so there will be there will be three of those.
BT: That's so exciting.
MB: Yeah.
BT: Is that a good point to talk about the new Alpha A? Would you like to talk about that?
MB: Sure. So for me, one of the issues has always been for people who play the clarinet we are faced with, as we go from a student towards an intermediate phase, if you play in an orchestra, a lot of the repertoire is for A. Many of the great pieces written for the clarinet,
the Mozart clarinet concerto, quintets, for example, by Brahms, Mozart, some of the real staples are written for A clarinet. And up to now, just finding a good A clarinet has been difficult. And usually, they're quite expensive at the starting point. For a lot of people who play it either casually or

professional, like you, you may need to play outdoors and you might not be comfortable taking your very, very high-end exotic instruments, but you still need something that allows you to perform at a level you're going to feel good about. So, our student clarinet has been called the Alpha series and the affordable bass is also called the Alpha. So, we have now done and I think you just saw the Alpha in A and it's meant in every way to be a professional quality of instrument tuning the voicing.
but it is made very efficiently and in synthetic materials we experiment with in a lot of synthetics.
I'm not as young as I look, when I started, there were, you know, maybe four or five hundred different synthetics you could choose from. Today, the last time I checked in one of the major directories of that kind of thing. There were over 330,000 materials available now. So, the world has opened up in terms of having materials that not only can be cost effective and machinable, but also have sonic profiles or acoustic sound profiles, which are very, very stable. And you need something that you can glue things on the surface and hold tenon corks and all. And we came up with one, we're very happy.
So we've now done the Alpha A and it's modelled on our Essence or Lumiere acoustic system.
And then it has the same style bell and barrel in synthetic, or you can put wooden ones on if you want to complement it. But so now, for a very low price, people can get what is truly an exceptional A clarinet.
BT: Fantastic.
MB: Yeah, it was a lot of fun to do.
BT: It's really like the middle of the Venn diagram of professional acoustic design, but with a cheap price, but it's in A. So, it's perfect for anyone that wants an affordable A clarinet.
MB: Yeah, and for whatever reason, and I'm not quite sure why, because when you look at other instruments, you know so, for an example, use the trumpet. I'm sorry for you clarinet players who are listening, but I'll use it as an example. In the world of trumpet in orchestras, they typically will play different pitches. Most typically B-flat and C, as well as some of the other, but those are their standard working tools. And you can go and you can buy good quality B-flat or C trumpets at various price points, and they're affordable. So, even a developing student, a good high school student, a tenth grader, starting to play in school orchestra, has access to a C. If you're a clarinet player, that bar to entry is many, many times that to get anything. And some of the instruments which have been affordable Cs have not always been stellar instruments. For example, you would not want to use most of them to play a real gig if you had to. But I would dare to say with the Alpha A, if you were to play it today, you'd say, You know, I can take this out and play it on any gig, and I don't think anyone's going to know.
BT: Fantastic, that's really a great response to this great need in the clarinet world.
MB: Yeah.
BT: Yeah, that's excellent.
MB: And that was really, really the goal. And, you know, our long-term goal is we will build out the whole family. We will do a contrabass clarinet.
BT: Ooh, wow.
MB: And we will, you know, do, there's another bass clarinet coming. There's a Lumiere bass coming, which for those of you that know me, I started as a clarinetist obviously but my true passion playing when I played professionally in the opera for example for many years I was the bass clarinetist and I've always been drawn to the sound of the bass clarinet but the problems have always been that mechanically the instruments are pretty unreliable, the tuning has been pretty squidgy all over the place, they've been crazy expensive. So, it's been a real joy to be able to design instruments that deal with a lot of those problems and I think we've managed to do it because now the number of bass clarinets for people who are doubling and taking up bass has just gone up exponentially in the market.
BT: Amazing.
MB: Yeah, it’s been a lot of fun.
BT: My question for you is when you're designing an instrument, whether it's bass or something else, how do you, acoustically, how do you overcome some of these issues? So, bass clarinet really flat down low, lots of resistance in the upper register, what do you do?

MB: Yeah, so I think the first thing to do is realize that, you know, the music world is always evolving, so I'm going to use a little, kind of explanation here that might be simpler.
For a long time, people played flutes with what was the known scale at the time, and about 40 years ago along trudges a little, kind of short Englishman named Albert Cooper, an Albert used a work in a couple of the companies in Great Britain and then he set up his own workshop outside his house in in literally like a eight by eight little wood shed with no power equipment. He used a treadle lathe.
BT: Wow.
MB: And he started experimenting with the scale and he said, why do we always accept that certain notes are low, certain notes are sharp, certain notes are flat. So when I did the clarinet, and particularly with the bass clarinet, I started by tuning one note and making samples to tune one note and we then people will in the clarinet world talk about undercutting all the time. You've seen the basses and you know your instruments. We actually do both undercutting and overcutting but the problem is for a long time the way boars were made, the undercutting was done by putting a little cutting ball through and then pulling it up or you put it in through the bore and then you pull it up. at a fixed angle, but if you saw the piece in half you'll see that the undercutting is not even, it looks kind of like a potato chip. So, we designed equipment and cutters where we can actually, it's almost like these moving hands and axis, where we can interpolate the hole or trace around it to really control the undercutting completely and we can match the inside and the outside.
So, one of the goals, for example, you'll see on your instrument here, this is an overcut where this is a raised hole. So, by changing the heights of the tone holes, we could deal with the resistance. Changing the venting could make the air feel as though it was easier to come out or more volume and sound. And then with the undercutting, we could control the twelfths. But we literally set about doing that in a way that had never really been done in the clarinet world before. So, our place is kind of a mix of a crazy science laboratory and a very advanced manufacturing facility. We try and work to aeroplane standards. So, for an example, when our keys are fit, they drop in, the rods that go in. There shouldn't be any forcing, there shouldn't be any sense of, well, I'll just put this screw in somewhere until it kind of works, but the keys still goes up and down.
BT: That brings me to my next question, which is about maintenance and, you know, I was lucky to hear you talk to the University of Melbourne students yesterday about oiling, not just the wood but the key mechanisms, knowing the tendencies of their instruments. Do you want to talk a little bit about maintaining instruments now that I've got these to take care of?
MB: Sure, so one of the things we all need to realize, you know, we all get really emotional about our instruments. We choose them really carefully. We try mouthpieces and reeds and we're playing and we play the same excerpt a hundred times. They become kind of part of us. And it's easy to forget that at the end of the day, as beautiful a musical tool as this is, it is actually a mechanical device. And the wood is basically, you know, it never grew up to be a clarinet. It just wanted to be a tree sitting outside in the grass, getting the sunshine. And then somebody comes along with a big axe or a chainsaw, cuts it down and proceeds to make billets out of it and then makes it into a completely different form. When we blow in an instrument, what we're blowing is not water. It's actually acid. So, if you do nothing to protect the inside of the bore, ultimately, the saliva pools up, and you start the first sign as you're getting more and more water in tone holes, then you're getting more and more tuning problems, and ultimately you're probably going to get cracking as well. So, by certain simple acts like oiling the bore on a regular basis with the right materials, you essentially make most of the saliva where it's slippery inside and it just falls out. Much less of it pools up in the instrument to become a problem. As far as the keys, you have metal on metal.
And I think yesterday you saw I was picking up different players and instruments.
And some of them sounded like farm implements. Tractors.
BT: Like that really, 'clack, clack, clack, clack' sound when they play.
MB: Right, And it's telling you that metal's touching metal. Well, first of all, musically, not very desirable, but more importantly, where you have metal on metal, it is wearing away at the tolerances And so all of these companies, look, one thing I can tell you is that every company wants to make good instruments. Every company tries within whatever the constraints are of their own organization,

to do their very best to provide a good product. But just like you periodically take a $250,000 Porsche in for servicing, it's not that Porsche didn't do a good job. It's for it to maintain its performance, you have to do certain things. Lubrication is really, really important. And so, I always ask when I do classes. Well, should you oil it or not, and people really don't know. You know, you say, "Well, if you do, what do you use for oil?" Again, it can be anything from, 'Gee, I use the olive oil in my kitchen,' to, "Oh, I had some spare motor oil left." And then, how often do you do it? How much do you do it? All of those things actually have kind of consequences. So, we try and, in whatever we do, we try and educate people and explain that if you want the instrument to work well for you, just give it a little bit of help and support to achieve your goals and we did a video one time and the video was called and I've changed makes up cars but I used to drive a Porsche and it was you know the way you basically the way you take care of your instrument pays for me to drive a Porsche and it was a tongue-in-cheek or a funny way of simply saying that I will end up doing a lot of work on your instrument which is expensive because you didn't do some of the simple things that you could have to maintain it and it's not very different than the speech you get, you know, if you go to your doctor and they say, "Well, you can't eat fried food with all the time." And you know, your sugar's a little bit high and you need to get out for some exercise. There's some things that you need to do to take care of yourself. Instruments are the same way. And I've had many, many times in my career, a panic-stricken phone call from a name player. I can tell you the names of some, which would, you know, these would be people you would know who they're about to go on stage at Carnegie Hall or they're playing, you know, in Tokyo or they're suddenly playing in any of the great halls in the world. It could be the Sydney Opera House in Australia. And something has gone wrong. And usually it's gone wrong at the worst possible moment and from something that could have been prevented. So, of course we're going to do whatever we can at that moment to help them get them through the moment and then take care of them. But really one of the things that I think everyone should learn on whatever instrument is basically what there is that you can do to keep the instrument in the best possible shape. So yesterday the conservatory we just basically ran through and we did simple things like just look at your swab.

You know if your swab would get confiscated at the border as a biohazard it might be time to either wash it or go into a shop and you know treat yourself to a new one maybe your birthday is coming up and you tell a friend when they say what would you like?

I would love some key oil, you know make their lives easier in your life a little bit better

BT: Amazing. So, one other thing that I just wanted to mention, if you haven't picked up on it already, Morrie, you have a wicked sense of humour which I love, it's refreshing, such a character and you're lucky enough to travel the world and talk to all these amazing players and students. Yesterday you had the students laughing and eating out of the palm of your hand, it was great to see. So, yeah do you have some and funny stories of your travels around the world.

MB: Yeah, I think there's different ones. First of all, I tell people all the time, often people say, oh, I'm kind of afraid to play in front of you, because all these luminaries who have ...

BT: Great storied players.

MB: ... played in front of historical features and people who are at the top of the field. You know, I've heard what I would say is the very best clarinet player in the world. And I've heard the very worst clarinet player in the world. And I do mean the worst, not even a close second. and other than those two people. So everyone else is going to be in the middle. So you can be pretty comfortable that way. My goal is to help each player sound the best that they can. I don't want you to say, "Oh, I love ..." I'll use as an example, you know, David Schifrin has been a client of mine for years, and I've always been a huge fan of David as just being a beautiful and articulate musician. And I've heard people, many who've studied with him or have said, "I want to sound like David Schifrin." I've never heard another player sound like David Schifrin. I think it's great to listen to those people who you love and say, "I want to try and achieve things in that direction." But ultimately, what will make you you is to listen to great players playing and say, "Wow, I really love the way, let's say, Corrado Giuffredi does something." Or, "I think the way Martin Frost does this is really beautiful." Or, I was listening and I was you know so moved with it in the historical recording of let's say Robert Marcellus and you listen and through that process you kind of cultivate how you want to sound and they people I just

mentioned are all fabulous players but there are so many and even in your local orchestras and there are people who are you know I know people who are amateurs and that they don't make their living with it but who play at extraordinarily high levels. You know, if you try as much as you can to listen to how you sound it will help you and I'm constantly amazed because when people try instruments the one thing I want to say is a lot of people will try instruments and they go oh you know it doesn't feel right or it doesn't feel right or it doesn't feel right. If you're going to a shoe shop and you try on ten sets of shoes, none of them are going to be quite as comfortable as what you're probably walking in with but you're used to it. With instruments I all always suggest to people, first of all, record yourself. While it's very handy to have someone else comment, by recording yourself when you're trying equipment, or the equipment you play. You can then listen when you're not doing it with feel, and then say, "Am I happy with my sound?" Some of the mouthpieces in my life that I've played that are the most comfortable they feel great sound horrible. Other ones where it just feels like it's harder work, but when I listen I say wow I never would have picked that because it just didn't feel as comfortable. So, it's a really handy tool to be able to listen to yourself. And the other thing is, look, don't be too hard on yourselves. I have people often, one of our artists and someone who I know really well I've travelled with is an Italian artist named Corrado Giufreddi. And for those of you that have ever met Corrado, you'll know he's kind of a bigger than life character, his personality, and when he plays the clarinet, it's kind of an act that just defies nature in what he can do. But he can tongue in a way, which seems impossible. And I've been with him when he's done lots of master classes and people will say, "Well, how do you do that?" And he'll do a little bit of explanation. And of course, nobody else can quite do it the same way. But that's fine because other people will have a completely different gift. I was listening the other day, and there was a little post on social media and it was one of our artists, and they were playing the opening of the Brahms. And I tend to go to the clarinet conference, and I hear Brahms play a lot. And frankly, it's very difficult to play well, both with piano and the clarinet. And usually it's got some challenges and this was just extraordinary playing and I wrote them a note probably and I said you know it's very seldom I say this but I could sit there and listen to play that piece all day where normally you know I want to go screaming in the night because the, it's so difficult that usually it sounds like it's a that difficult thing. But I think the other thing is that you know when we all start and I think I may have said this in in class, but I say quite often. As beginners, somebody will hand us an instrument or we'll go to a musical instrument, petting zoo, or something where we get interested. Our parents will say you should play an instrument. Someone will almost inevitably say, "Do you want to play the clarinet?" To me when I hear the word "play" then and now means there should be joyfulness in this. It should be fun. It should be something we love to do that we look forward to doing. If you're so hard on yourself that you ‘re taking the joy out of it to try for technical perfection, for example. That will come across. The one thing I will tell you about working with a lot of the world's really great players is there is a joyfulness in the music making. Now, they may have played that piece a thousand times in a rehearsal room to get it to the point where there could be that freedom, but you will know a great player because it just transcends all the normal things that we find difficult. So try and pick some repertoire that you can do comfortably. You're not killing yourself. You know, one piece of comes to mind, for example, Piazzola wrote a piece called Oblivion. And I've heard a number of people use it as an encore piece. It's not technically difficult, but musically when it's played beautifully. It really just can stir your soul in terms of that. And don't be afraid, you know, to have a little fun. If you make a mistake or you squeak, look, we're not curing cancer, you're not going to cause a pile up on the freeway. Try it again. Maybe the reed wasn't quite moist. Maybe your lip was quivering a little bit. Maybe it's technically something you need to slow down to be able to gently bring up the speed in terms of that. But I can tell you, even if you play in a great orchestra, every other person on that stage has made mistakes. Every other person there has had a bad day. So, the fact that you have one, don't let it get you down. It's, you know, it's part of the learning path for that. And have fun playing the clarinet. It's a great instrument.

BT: Wow, beautiful.

Thank you, Morrie so much. I'm taking the time to sit down with me today.

MB: My, my pleasure. Thanks for your confidence in choosing, choosing Backun. We're, we're honoured that you've chosen it.
BT: Thanks for making beautiful instruments. They're incredible and I look forward to playing them for many years to come. Thank you. Thank you so much.
MB: Pleasure being with you.
BT: That's all we have time for today. Thank you. Make sure that comment, subscribe, all that jazz. And look forward to seeing you in the next episode. Bye for now.
MB: Bye Bye.

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