

# The School of Music's Shauna McDonald to solo with Ottawa Symphony Orchestra

Interview by Suzu Enns

This January 23rd, in the National Arts Centre's Southam hall, the Ottawa Symphony Orchestra will continue its celebration of David Currie's 20th Anniversary as Music Director! The exciting program will feature the OSO's Principal Clarinetist Shauna McDonald in her solo debut with the orchestra, performing Claude Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie*. Shauna is on faculty at the University of Ottawa, and this concert joins the OSO and the University of Ottawa Orchestra, also led by David Currie. I had the pleasure to speak with Shauna in December. We discussed her upcoming solo debut with the OSO, performing in the OSO wind section, practice techniques, and other fun topics!



Shauna's clarinet studies began in Vancouver, where she studied with Stephen Robb and performed with the Delta Youth Orchestra and Vancouver Youth Symphony Orchestra. She completed further studies at McGill University (studying with Robert Crowley) and DePaul University in Chicago (with Larry Combs). She was Principal clarinetist of the DePaul Symphony Orchestra and has played with the National Youth Orchestra of Canada and *L'Orchestre de la Francophonie*. Further, she has been a prize-winner at the Elora Music Festival and has performed at the Ottawa International Chamberfest. Shauna performs frequently with the National Arts Centre Orchestra and can be heard on CBC broadcasts.

*SE: This is your fourth season with the OSO; what do you enjoy most about your position in the orchestra?*

*Shauna McDonald:* I love being a wind player in an orchestra because you get to be a soloist, a chamber musician and part of a large team all at the same time. The OSO plays big, exciting works, so I'm always looking forward to the next challenge.

*SE: What are a couple of more memorable moments you have had with the OSO?*

*SM:* A couple of years ago we did a joint concert with the OYO. I loved playing with the young, aspiring musicians. It reminded me of when my high school youth orchestra got to play with the Vancouver Symphony. I was so excited to play beside Wes Foster, and I couldn't believe I was playing in this huge venue with a professional orchestra!

*SE: What pieces have you performed as a soloist with orchestra in the past?*

*SM:* My first solo performance with orchestra was when I was 16. I won the concerto competition at my youth orchestra in Delta, BC and I performed the Johann Stamitz concerto. I performed the Mozart clarinet concerto with the Pembroke Symphony in 2009. This will be my third time performing as a soloist in front of an orchestra.

*SE: As well as your performance of the Première Rhapsodie, Ravel's Daphnis and Chloe is also on the program. What are you doing to prepare for this demanding program?*

*SM: I'll do the usual things I do when preparing for a concert: score study, listening to recordings, and practicing my own part. I've performed both suites of Daphnis and Chloe before, but it seems no matter how often I perform it, when I pull out the part it's as if I'm looking at it for the first time!*

*SE: Have you performed Debussy's Première Rhapsodie before?*

*SM: Only in juries, and a masterclass or two. I haven't played it with an orchestra before, so I'm really curious to see what the balance and colour changes are like.*

*SE: When you heard the piece as a student, what were your first impressions?*

*SM: I thought the piece sounded so dreamy, with its penetrating slow melodies over a rolling accompaniment. I also thought it sounded a little "out there" because of all the mood changes and fast runs with a sparse accompaniment. Debussy wrote this for a competition at the Paris Conservatoire, and he wrote in his letters that he heard his piece played many times – all bad. So of course, I had the impression that it is a challenging piece to get just right.*

*SE: We all have favourite editions we play from. For the Première Rhapsodie, which edition do you prefer and why?*

*SM: I prefer the Elkan-Vogel, INC and Durand editions, but only because they have my teachers' markings in them. It's a purely sentimental preference.*

*SE: What are some aspects of performing the piece that make it especially demanding?*

*SM: The fast dynamic changes and very high, soft passages. Even though it's a relatively short piece, fitting all the different moods and colours into 9 minutes of music still tests your endurance. Finding the perfect reed to accommodate *fff* followed immediately by a *ppp* passage is also a fun endeavour.*

*SE: What are some of your personal practice techniques for this piece?*

*SM: The technical-passages-slowly, is one. There are so many runs that are virtually identical except for one or two semitones right in the middle of the phrase. I strive to make those nuances clearly audible. Practising dynamic control is a second big thing. Playing long crescendo without changing pitch or tone quality is a favourite exercise of mine. I'll likely play this for friends to get their opinions. Frequently an outside perspective will really open up some aspect of the piece I haven't previously considered.*

*SE: What changes do you make in your playing as you change roles from orchestral member to soloist?*

*SM: I make only a few changes, but I suppose they are important ones. As a soloist I feel responsible for directing the flow of the piece. As an orchestral member I feel more like part of a team; making decisions with other people. Soloists also have to make sure that they're heard at all times, which is more challenging in front of an orchestra as opposed to smaller accompaniment.*

*SE: In the few years you have lived in Ottawa, what have you come to enjoy about the music scene in this city?*

*SM:* The fabulous musicians that live in this city, of course!

*SE:* *If you found yourself to be stranded on a desert island (or, perhaps worse, an Ottawa blizzard!), what are three tunes you would choose to have with you?*

*SM:* That's a hard one! My three pieces would be Saint-Saëns Symphony no. 3, Brahms trio for clarinet, cello and piano, and Mendelssohn's Symphony no. 3, all for sentimental reasons.

*SE:* *You weren't always going to be a musician. What were some competing interests as you were growing up?*

*SM:* Music was always the thing in life I was excited about, but I also love creative writing. I actually did a year in university in creative writing, political science, and ancient civilization studies. Music was what I did for fun in high school, so I didn't think it was acceptable to do it for a living. I changed my mind after a few months of political science!

*SE:* *Apart from your extensive involvement in music, what do you enjoy doing in your free time?*

*SM:* In my free time I like to take my dog for hikes in the Gatineau hills. I also like to run and dance salsa.

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Tickets can be purchased by phone, in person or online.

Ticketmaster: 1-888-991-2787 (ARTS)

NAC Box Office (53 Elgin Street, Ottawa)

Monday to Saturday 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Ticket prices range from \$26-\$71

Live Rush Students: \$12

Suzu Enns is a first year clarinet student in the Masters of Music program at the School of Music.  
She is a student of NACO clarinetist and School of Music prof. Kimball Sykes.