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Early in 2013, I undertook the daunting task of revising my 1973 clarinet concerto, which was originally written as my doctoral dissertation in composition at Florida State University. It was played there once in the spring of 1974, and then promptly fell into the dust-bin of academic obscurity, where it languished for 4 decades, until at last I returned to disturb its slumber.

When I first dug it out and began to get re-acquainted with it, I quickly realized that in its original shape, as the work of a graduate composition student who still had much to learn about writing in large forms, this concerto needed a fair amount of revision. But I felt like there was more than enough merit in the work to justify spending the time and energy that would be required to turn it into a viable piece of music, so I committed to the project and started digging in.

At first it felt like I was taking the ax to someone else's work, which made me uncomfortable. Eventually I made peace with this feeling and conceded that it was indeed originally written by "someone else," but since I am the "direct descendant" of that person, I need feel no guilt about tearing his work apart and rebuilding it.

The clarinetist with whom I had worked while writing the piece, and who played it at FSU, had told me that in the clarinet concerto literature that he was acquainted with, only the one by Danish composer Carl Nielsen (1865-1931) is more difficult for the soloist. But I decided at the outset of my revision project that I would not ease off on the solo part, so I left it largely intact, minus cuts. After all, I had worked with an excellent clarinetist who had pronounced it—while very challenging—completely idiomatic for the instrument, so I didn't want to mess with it. But what I did need to do was overhaul the form of the composition, re-orchestrate much of it, and cut out several minutes of unnecessary material until I had a cohesive work that made musical sense.

I soon found that the lyrical second movement and sonata-rondo/theme and variations hybrid third movement, for which I had taken a page from Copland and linked with a cadenza, needed less revision than the first. After I made a few cuts, did some tweaking and quite a lot of re-orchestrating, they were ready to go.

But the first movement—a complex experimental hybrid of sonata-allegro and arch forms—needed more work, and I have to say it was quite an enlightening challenge wrestling it into shape. I cut about 20% of it, reduced the number and prominence of several “breaking waves” that are a feature of the movement, and did an extensive amount of re-writing on the remainder. It went through several revisions over the nearly two years that I struggled with it—alternating between periods of intense work and resting in the “wine cellar”—before I was finally satisfied and declared it completed.

The concerto is scored for solo Bb clarinet, flute/piccolo, oboe, bassoon, 2 horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, piano, and strings.