

Approaching La Création

This series of articles on jazz-influenced music now moves to Europe, where American jazz could be heard from the late 1910s and exerted an influence on many performers and composers. Darius Milhaud stated that in *La Création du Monde* (1923) he 'made wholesale use of the jazz style to convey a purely classical feeling' (1953:149). Indeed, the piece is basically 'classical' in style and conception, in that it is 'fixed' in terms of its representation in a conventional score and thus appears to have fewer potential interpretive problems than many other 'jazz-influenced' works. However, there is a need for a thorough understanding of the way in which jazz influenced Milhaud to recognise that jazz manifests itself overtly and audibly in certain parts of the work, but also acts more subtly throughout. Significantly, the stimulus for Milhaud's close imitation of jazz was by no means purely musical and consideration of the non-musical aspects of the ballet can aid an overall understanding of the score.

Milhaud first encountered jazz in London in 1920. His autobiography *Notes without Music* documents that he attended performances given by Billy Arnold and his band, a 'novelty' group modelled on the Original Dixieland Jazz Band that was a huge hit during a visit to London in 1919-1920. Milhaud 'sat close to the musicians [and] tried to assimilate what I heard' (1953:118), and it was at this stage that he 'had the idea of using these timbres and rhythms in a work of chamber music' (1953:119). Milhaud was disparaging of composers who had already used jazz in their work, such as Satie, Auric and Stravinsky, stating that they had 'confined themselves to what were more or less interpretations of dance music'. It is clear that he wanted to achieve a deeper understanding of jazz and to achieve a stylistic synthesis rather than producing a mere 'interpretation'. Therefore, although Milhaud was determined to incorporate the timbres and rhythms that he heard in Arnold's music into his own work, it was to be three years before he began work on *La Création du*

Monde, because he felt that he had to 'penetrate more deeply into the arcana of this new musical form' (1953:119).

Milhaud was able to reach a deeper understanding of the cultural roots of jazz during a visit to America in 1922, where he heard different forms of the music ranging from Paul Whiteman's band to New Orleans jazz in Harlem. The latter seemed to make a greater impression on Milhaud, and he purchased 'Black Swan' records of African-American performers that he 'never wearied of playing over and over' (1953:137). These experiences provided him with the necessary inspiration and knowledge so that by the time he returned to France, he resolved 'more than ever... to use jazz for a chamber work' (1953:137). However, the cultural climate of 1920s Paris was as important as Milhaud's experiences in Harlem in the genesis of *La Création du Monde*. The production of the ballet involved the collaboration between a composer, writer, designer and choreographer that typified the inextricable links between art forms that existed in Paris since the late nineteenth century. Milhaud had close friendships with the writer Blaise Cendrars and the artist Fernand Léger who were to be vital to the production of *La Création du Monde*. The relationship between music and the concept behind the ballet was clearly very important to Milhaud, and he commented that 'on this occasion I remained more closely in contact with my collaborators than for any other of my works' (1953:147).

The interest in exotic cultures in Paris stretched back into the nineteenth century, when the erosion of the traditional foundations of music and art prompted many composers and artists to seek inspiration from outside the confines of Europe and the Western world. The fascination with 'other' cultures continued into the twentieth century when there was great interest in so-called 'primitive' African art and culture, and Parisian exhibitions and publications influenced modernist artists such as Picasso and Derain. Indeed, it is a paradox that primitive cultures were on one hand adopted

because they were far removed from Western society, but yet primitivism itself became a prominent trend in modern art, a phenomenon which manifests itself clearly in *La Création du Monde*.

African culture was an important influence in the 'non-musical' aspects of *La Création du Monde*. Cendrars, Léger and Borlin (the choreographer for the ballet) had been engaged in ethnographic research prior to collaborating with Milhaud (Watkins, 1994:122). Cendrars had visited Africa and South America and in 1921 published *L'Anthologie Nègre* containing African songs and poems in translation. The scenario for *La Création du Monde*, which depicts the creation of the world from an African perspective, was drawn from this material. Similarly, Léger's design for the ballet was clearly inspired by the muted colours and striking patterns of African art. The dancers were dressed in costumes that functioned as masks for the body, inspired by copying and redesigning African masks.

Milhaud's composition of the score for the ballet clearly complements the formulation of its narrative and design. There is obvious evidence of imitation of 'primitive' sources and their assimilation into modern art, except that in his use of jazz as performed by Billy Arnold, Milhaud was imitating a modern form within which the African influence is *already* assimilated. Jazz was unique in the 1920s in presenting 'primitive' culture in a way in which it could be easily reproduced and experienced directly by Europeans, as it was based upon standard instruments and musical principles. Jazz thus 'became a cultural shorthand for that which was both supremely modern and, through its African roots, connected with the exotic origins of things. It was the music of the urban jungle' (Lively, 1998:99).

From Milhaud's own accounts, it seems that the timbre of the jazz that he heard in London and America that struck him most forcefully. The instrumentation of the shows that he attended on visits to Harlem clearly had an influence on the chamber

du Monde



orchestration of *La Création du Monde*: 'a flute, a clarinet, two trumpets, a trombone, an assortment of percussion instruments all handled by one player, a piano, a string quartet in which the viola is replaced by a saxophone, and a double bass' (Collaer, 1988:69) It is interesting to note that the 'assortment of percussion instruments', is replicated in Milhaud's work, and in particular the inclusion of the 'Grosse caisse à pied avec cymbale' the precursor to the modern drum kit that had begun to appear in jazz bands from this time. Milhaud's understanding of the saxophone as a viola replacement is also seen in the positioning of this instrument in the score, although it features prominently and soloistically throughout the work. In addition, the way in which Milhaud wrote for the instruments present in small jazz bands such as Billy Arnold's shows the continued influence of the experience in London described in *Notes without Music* (1953:118):

- 'the saxophone breaking in, squeezing out the juice of dreams'
- 'the trumpet, dramatic or languorous by turns'
- 'the clarinet, frequently played in its upper register'
- 'the lyrical use of the trombone, glancing with its slide over quarter-tones in crescendos of volume and pitch'
- 'held together by the piano and subtly punctuated by the complex rhythms of the percussion'

However, the influence of jazz (as defined by Arnold's band) is mainly restricted to two specific areas of the piece, marked I and IV in the score, which use clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, trombone as the main melodic instruments with piano and percussion in the accompaniment – the exact orchestration that Milhaud noted in Arnold's band. Milhaud was also influenced by the rhythms of jazz, noting that the 'constant use of syncopation' in the individual melodic lines together produced contrapuntal complexity, and his use of a fugue with a syncopated subject evidences his experimentation in this way. Sections I and IV are also the most rhythmic, as although syncopation is present throughout the work, it is not as striking in the other sections of the piece. Therefore, through the use of timbre and rhythm, Milhaud creates two sections that are quite distinct from the rest of the work.

Accounting for these most obvious manifestations of jazz in the work is important, but only part of the story, as

in addition the influence of the blues throughout the work indicates that similarly to Cendrars and Léger, Milhaud had researched the equivalent of their 'primitive African' sources in detail. Deborah Mawer has noted the prevalence of the blues influence both in the melodic material and in the underlying structures of parts of the piece in her extensive analysis (1997). For example, the blues is implied in juxtaposition of the raised and lowered third degree of the scale (F# and natural) from the outset in the opening section of the piece; the blues scale is used in the fugue subject and there is a possible quotation from the *St. Louis Blues* march in the counter-subject; and a blues-type structure is used in section II.

Milhaud certainly recognised the difference between jazz such as that performed by Paul Whiteman which had 'the precision of an elegant, well-oiled machine, a sort of Rolls-Royce of dance music, but whose atmosphere remained entirely of this world' and the music that he heard in Harlem which was 'absolutely different from anything I had ever heard before and was a revelation to me... this authentic music had its roots in the darkest corners of the Negro soul, the vestigial traces of Africa' (1953:136). It seems clear in his score to *La Création du Monde* that Milhaud was similarly aware of the difference between the jazz bands such as Arnold's and the blues that he heard in Harlem. Indeed, understanding what Milhaud was trying to achieve in *La Création du Monde* seems to hinge upon the relationship between jazz and blues. In particular, the way that the two influences are linked within the work is significant; for example, by slowing the 'jazz' fugue theme and presenting it on the cello within a restatement of the initial 'blues' material in section II, Milhaud makes the listener more aware of its blues inflections. Similarly, the rhythmic cliché in section IV is slowed down and used to punctuate a restatement of the same initial blues material. This may suggest that just as Cendrars and Léger had embarked upon their own investigations of African culture that enabled them to progress further than mere imitation of sources, so Milhaud, through his Harlem experiences, was able to understand the cultural and musical origins of jazz and incorporate the language of the blues thoroughly within his own style.

It has been suggested that *La Création du Monde* demonstrates a total assimilation of primitivism. The 'primitive' influence on Cendrars, Léger and Borlin functioned within an established Western cultural format (ballet) but yet the work is profoundly modern as it is representative of the latest artistic trends. Similarly, Milhaud's use of the language of jazz and blues within traditional formal structures, suggests that the work is representative

of the concurrent musical trend of neoclassicism, but the incorporation of 'primitive' musical influences into the score ensured its modernity. However, a fundamental problem with *La Création du Monde* in the twenty-first century, as Watkins has pointed out, is that it 'sounds like a 1920s period piece' (1994:132), particularly in the aforementioned 'jazz' sections. It may be unfavourably compared in retrospect with both Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*, which embodied revolutionary primitivism, and Gershwin's contemporaneous *Rhapsody in Blue*, in which an often similar-sounding jazz influence is apparently more consistent. However, *La Création du Monde* evidences Milhaud's deep understanding and respect for jazz and blues outlined in his writings. It is significant that he eventually decided to 'give up jazz' because 'Snobs, Whites, amateurs of exoticism, tourists of negro music had penetrated even its most intimate nooks' (Mawer, 1997:124).

Deborah Mawer writes that 'any practising jazz musician would assert that Milhaud's assimilation of jazz and the blues scale is still a far cry from the real, spontaneous art' (1997:274). Such a view brings to bear modern notions of jazz upon a response to its earliest forms, and would fail to recognise the context within which Milhaud's compositional response took place. Similarly, Jody Blake's view that the contributors to *La Création du Monde* made African music and dance conform to European values does not recognise the value of their work as a European response to more direct experience of exotic culture than ever before. *La Création du Monde* can be best understood as 'multi-media' collaboration between composer, writer, designer and choreographer, within the specific cultural climate of Paris in the 1920s, where jazz signified a complex amalgamation of African primitivism and Western modernity.

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