

In the final part of this series on jazz-influenced wind music, we shall consider Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto*. Stravinsky was a composer whose output embraced many of the major musical trends of the twentieth century, ranging from jazz to serialism. He wrote several jazz-influenced works, but stated that *Ebony Concerto* was his favourite "though it is remote from me now, like the work of a sympathetic colleague I once knew well" (1968, p. 53). *Ebony Concerto* was composed in response to a commission from the jazz bandleader Woody Herman and completed in 1945, the same year in which Stravinsky became an American citizen. It was first performed by Herman's band in Carnegie Hall in the following year (White, 1966, p. 397).

Stravinsky's move to America necessitated a move into commercial music composition to survive. In works like *Tango* (1940), *Circus Polka* (1941) and the *Scherzo à la russe* (1944) there is a sense that he adapted his musical style to adhere to particular briefs. However, it seems that in *Ebony Concerto*, Stravinsky was clearly keen to move away from an imitative approach to "popular" composition and it is clear that his new method drew, like Milhaud, on a deeper understanding of the cultural aspects of jazz rather than merely incorporating musical details into a piece. It seems that in *Ebony Concerto* Stravinsky has tried to achieve a fusion between his individual compositional style and the jazz elements, rather than having to adapt his musical language to fit an imposed style.

The jazz influence in *Ebony Concerto* is very subtle, but clues to Stravinsky's thinking and compositional approach may be found in his dialogue "Jazz Commercials" with Robert Craft (1968). It might seem odd, initially, that a composer who had become aware of improvisational elements in jazz and admired performers such as Art Tatum, Charlie Parker and Charles Christian wrote a work containing no improvisation. However, just as Stravinsky describes his "non-metrical pieces for piano solo and clarinet solo" as "written-out portraits of improvisation", so the *Ebony Concerto* may be considered a written-out portrait of jazz. In fact, the piano and solo clarinet flourishes in the first movement are good examples of

"written out improvisation" that may have been influenced by the be-bop that Stravinsky was listening to at the time, but remain within his own musical language. Linked to this is Stravinsky's idea that "jazz performance is more interesting than jazz composition", by which he meant the non-notated elements of the music such as improvisation, but this also implies performance style. Hence, it is not surprising to find a certain freedom in the performance of *Ebony Concerto* conducted by Stravinsky, particularly in respect to the reed players who take a jazz approach,

will play loudly at the end of a piece - Stravinsky's ending is strong in a more subtle way.

The fact that "Ebony" does not mean clarinet means that the piece is not really a clarinet concerto. The presence of a solo clarinet can probably be attributed to the fact that Herman played clarinet in his band rather than a conscious decision to feature the instrument. Rather, as Stravinsky himself stated, the "concerto" idea manifests itself here as a "concerto grosso". The first movement is in a sonata-type form. The opening has great

rhythmic drive and interest, and the second idea is more melodic, whilst remnants of the initial theme remain in the accompaniment. The soloistic flourishes for clarinet and piano occur before the repeat of the opening section, a conventional place for such "developmental" material. The second movement is in simple binary form, and the third a loose theme and variations. Hence the piece is rooted in conventional "classical" structures. A "classical" approach is also evident in the instrumentation of *Ebony Concerto*, which uses extended big band orchestration incorporating harp and French horn.

Although there is some sectional writing derived from conventional big band scoring, Stravinsky's approach to the constituents of the ensemble is free. For instance, unusual combinations such as clarinet and trombone, and baritone saxophone and trumpet can be heard in the first movement. Significantly, unlike Bernstein in *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs*, there is no sense that Stravinsky is writing for a "rhythm section", as piano, guitar, bass and percussion are treated as additional instrumental colour in the ensemble.

The use of conventional formal structures in conjunction with an individual musical language links the work with the neo-classic tendencies present in other works by Stravinsky. Like these works, of which *Pulcinella* may be one of the best known, various influences are skilfully combined within the overall style so that the work remains an individual expression rather than just an imitative pastiche. This may be best illustrated in *Ebony Concerto* with reference to the use of rhythm. Although syncopation, a feature

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incorporating a variety of (non-notated) articulations and some "swung" quavers.

Also important when performing the piece is Stravinsky's explanation of the title: "Ebony" does not mean 'clarinet', incidentally, but 'African'. Stravinsky goes on to say "blues meant African culture to me", and it is the influence of the blues rather than contemporary be-bop that can be more clearly discerned in the work, particularly in the second and third movements. The second movement uses a blues-influenced melody echoing between tenor and baritone saxophones and Harmon muted trumpets. The colour of a closely scored clarinet ensemble is introduced, which adds to the dark and sombre mood. The last movement takes as its basis a simple blues-inspired theme, which uses only four pitches and incorporates a prominent minor 3rd. The ending of the piece is understated, yet the presence of a sharpened third (F#) in the harmony suggests muted triumph and the overall effect is powerful. This seems to draw on our expectations that a big band

of jazz, is prevalent throughout the work, it is often achieved through metrical displacement of ideas (taking a short rhythmic pattern and playing it in different parts of the bar), a feature of Stravinsky's style that can be seen in numerous other works: "in retrospect, it is easy to see how the repetitive patterns, syncopations, and small but characteristic instrumental grouping of jazz were so readily reconcilable with the ostinati, shifting accentuation and chamber ensembles of Stravinsky's post-Sacre production." (Watkins, 1994, p.102)

The *New Grove* article on Stravinsky points out the similarity between *Ebony Concerto* and the *Concerto in D* for string orchestra, composed immediately afterwards in 1946, stating that these two pieces represent respectively the commercial and neo-classic sides of Stravinsky's compositional style at this time. There are certainly notable resemblances when the thematic material of the two pieces is compared, and the author notes that it is not "clear that the conventional piece is superior to the pot-boiler" I would argue that the similarities between the two pieces indicates that the *Ebony Concerto* was more than a "pot-boiler", as Stravinsky himself attested, as pursuing another composition along similar lines would seem to indicate that *Ebony Concerto* was part of his compositional development rather than a diverting but financially rewarding sideline as the earlier popular pieces had been. The designation "pot-boiler" could in fact be applied to the *Concerto in D*, written after the *Ebony Concerto* and re-working ideas for a necessarily "safe" composition, which was "Stravinsky's first European commission for over twelve years" (White, 1966, p. 399)

Both pieces are in some way representative of aspects of Stravinsky's compositional style and draw strongly on classical formal conventions. The main difference between the two pieces is accounted for in the additional influence on the musical language and detail of the piece, but the fact that in the *Concerto in D* this is primarily "classical" and in *Ebony Concerto* primarily "popular" does not mean that the resulting works are "conventional" or "commercial" respectively. Whilst the

*New Grove* refers to *Ebony Concerto* as "an immaculate, stylized portrait of the balletic precision of big band playing" I have argued that Stravinsky deliberately flaunts the conventions of the commercial big band style, and that the musical language of the blues and the concept of jazz, rather than necessarily its substance, are more influential here.

#### Some final thoughts on performing jazz-influenced works

The demands of both jazz and (neo-) classical styles must normally be satisfied for convincing interpretations of jazz-influ-

enced pieces. However, performances of this repertoire show that it is tempting to over-play the jazz elements at the expense of the other aspects of the work. Often, the presence of jazz can erroneously lead to an overly free approach to the notated aspects of these works, but as they are "jazz-influenced" and not "jazz", there are limits to the extent to which improvisation can be part of performances without the integrity of the composition itself being destroyed. On the other hand, just as with any music, merely playing the notes exactly as on the page would probably lead to a defunct and dull performance. A balance must be struck between fidelity to the score, stylistic awareness and personal expression to produce a lively and convincing interpretation of any one of these pieces. As I have indicated, approaching these works might involve consideration of the notation, available recordings of the work and the music that influenced its composer, documentary sources such as manuscripts, journals and reviews in addition to secondary literature

on the society and culture that surrounded the composition of the piece. In addition, experience of jazz through performance can be very valuable in approaching jazz-influenced works, and the large amount of quality jazz ensemble music, historic and modern, is an important part of modern wind repertoire that can be neglected in favour of music that aspires to "symphonic" status

Fundamentally, the most exciting possibilities within the wind ensemble world result from the flexibility of the medium. With repertoire ranging from exciting avant-garde commissions, Harmoniemusik, and big band classics, wind ensembles have an important place within contemporary, classical and jazz genres. It seems vital that we celebrate such diversity and perform a wide range of works as this can only enhance the status of the wind music and musicians. However, in doing this we must not risk homogenising the stylistic diversity of the available repertoire, as all music must be performed in informed ways. In his presentation at the BASBWE Conference in 2003, Dr Alan Wagner outlined the increase during the last twenty years in the number of jazz-

influenced works composed for symphonic winds. If we are to tackle this repertoire convincingly, we must be prepared to invest the same time and energy in understanding jazz, through research, listening and performance, as many of us have in our "classical" music education. Only then can symphonic bands develop the capabilities to exploit the full extent of their existing repertoire, feel able to commission a wider range of composers and be able to respond to the challenges that they might pose to conductors and performers.

#### References

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