

Barbarous, deep, resonant, simplistic, passionate, polytonal, are all mediums Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) employs to create his colorful jazz ballet, *La Creation du monde*. Milhaud was a highly influential nineteenth century French composer who made great strides in removing the 'black' and 'white' from musicianship and is responsible for revolutionarily transforming music into a 'colorblind' view of the world. Milhaud's unique style have contributed to the acceptance of jazz into other genres, devoting his composition, *La Creation du monde* (1922-23), to eliminating the primitivist image of the early blues. The transcendence of such musical freedom allowed this controversial composer to empower musicians to move beyond cultural stereotypes. In effect, this propelled the art form forward by partnering the innovative techniques of jazz with the distinct classicism of the era.

Through a simple twist of fate as a Jewish composer in an anti-Semitic world, Milhaud injects his compositions with a passionate tolerance for cultural differences, inspiring technical variations. In essence, Milhaud, in his *La creation de monde* combines a French nationalist style and the vitality of American jazz in the context of African American folklore, accomplishing all of this in the elegance of ballet.

Throughout Darius Milhaud's existence, beginning on September 4, 1892 in the Aix-en-Provence, France, he has been exposed to a world filled with absolute music and virtuosity. Although he grew up in a musical household, early on, he set out to pursue a more "nostalgic", expressive kind of music that moved away from the French folksongs and into more "robust forms, avoiding pastel shades of sentimental harmonies orchestrated with the eye and not the

ear”.¹ In his early years, post World War I, he embraced the musical liberation that occurred around the world introducing the French to new genres and new cultures. A particular infusion that caught his eye was the dual invasion of jazz and Stravinsky in Paris.² Stravinsky’s deep interest in polytonality led to Milhaud’s expressionistic obsession with polytonal combinations soaked in the fragrant zeal of Latin rhythms.³ Yet, despite traces of Franck and Brahms appearing in Milhaud’s first compositions along with Debussy, Milhaud was the most impacted by two poets, Francis Jammes and Paul Claudel.⁴ Milhaud’s interest in their works was only confirmed in his compositions against impressionism, resulting in his work, *La Creation du monde*.⁵

Through Milhaud’s dedication and religious zeal, he was able to delve into scores that strayed away from his earlier French counterparts. Milhaud was drawn by the allure of jazz and South American music modeling *La Creation du monde* after the “seventeen-piece instrumental ensemble” resembling the African bands he heard in Harlem, infusing the piece with colorful chord combinations against the traditional harmonies of French atonality.⁶ Milhaud also borrows

¹ Bauer, Marion. “Darius Milhaud.” *The Musical Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (April 1942), 144. Milhaud was specifically interested in expanding the ‘color palate’ of tonality. Through the influence of “modern” composers, Debussy, Franck, Chausson, Ravel, and Lalo, among others, he wished to re-connect with the music and eliminate the “symbolist fogs” revealing a new world by simply “opening one’s eyes.” Milhaud used this dramatic style leaving out “pastel tones” to infuse his music with drama, nearing the genre of early opera. His “humorous, colorful, fearless, sometimes violent expression” led to his development of a renewed polyphonic chorus, contributing to the individuality of his works.

² Ibid.

³ Cooper, Martin. *French Music: From the death of Berlioz to the death of Faure*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 190. In 1917, after discovering the poetic writings of Paul Claudel, Milhaud followed Claudel, named French Ambassador to Brazil. His time spent in the “marvelous country” left an impression that is forever imprinted in his compositions. His use of rich syncopation trapped in the melodiousness of the people led him to compose two volumes of piano pieces entitled, *Saudades do Brazil*, which eventually led him to the genre of North American jazz.

⁴ Brauer, 144.

⁵ Ibid, 145.

⁶ Monaghan, Peter. “An Idiosyncratic Composer Explores the Sonic Mystery of the World.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 42, no.32 (April 19, 1996): 1.

from his French origins the extension of diatonic modality intermixing with the Wagnerian chromaticism of the era appealing to the French nationalist pride while instilling ethnic tolerance.⁷

Although Milhaud was highly criticized for his fearless combinations of jazz and French tradition, he remained resilient, leading to his recognition as a respected and most influential French composer of his time. Even though Milhaud struggled to cope with the anti-Semitic environment of France, he continued to employ an expressive “spiritedness” in his works revealed a passionate conviction.⁸ After returning from Brazil, he encountered the freedom of syncopation accompanied by the neutrality of the environment, solidifying his interest in worldly cultures and tolerance of traditional differences. As portrayed in his work, *La Creation du monde*, Milhaud’s inclination to explore polytonality and expand his musical lens to create new musical techniques based on Brazilian and jazz elements.⁹

The remnants of French music are present in the acceptance of a “French form” of jazz.¹⁰ In other words, jazz harmonies and jazz forms were only accepted if they incorporated Baroque elements such as canons or fugues. By securing a traditional device into a non traditional form led to the formation of “symphonic jazz”.¹¹ “Free jazz” was only first employed and accepted by

⁷ Rogers, Robert M. “Jazz Influence on French Music.” *The Musical Quarterly* 21, no.1 (January 1935): 55-56. Milhaud’s membership as a contributing member to “Les Six”, a group made up of composers which sought to push the boundaries of French music, contributed to his fascination and commitment to exposing the “myths of European culture” and beyond. “Les Six” sought to infuse French ballet with new esthetics, moving away from popular melodies to create a coloratura of sound and warmth in sonority that “rolls and bounds with freedom”. Truly, this revolutionary music defined the group as “one of the most vital figures of musical young France”.

⁸ Milhaud, Darius. *Notes without Music*. (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, Inc., 1953), 23.

⁹ Gendron, Bernard. “Jamming at Le Boeuf: Jazz and the Paris Avant-Garde.” *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 12, no.1 (Fall/Winter 1989): 4.

¹⁰ Fulcher, Jane F. *French Cultural Politics & Music*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 19.

the late 1920s, accepting the idea of improvisation as a true musical art form.¹² This idea of the primitivist culture of jazz is exposed in the technicalities that are brought to the surface in Darius Milhaud's *La Creation du monde*.

In *La Creation du monde*, Milhaud exposes the 'primitivist myth' surrounding African culture through the medium of African jazz. In this instance, Milhaud unveils the perception of European society refuting their animalistic tendencies based on their "color, lack of Christian faith and social customs" which to most Europeans meant an uncivilized existence.¹³ Overall, Milhaud was able to create "a genuine synthesis of jazz elements with classic western procedures".¹⁴

By borrowing jazz themes from "Les Six" composers, he was able to shape the "improvisatory black jazz" utilizing their powerful rhythms and expressive technique to produce a "lyricism that is the product of an oppressed race".¹⁵ His ability to incorporate the spontaneity which Africans were once shunned from the arts for evoking, has, in turn, led to the creation of prominent works when combined with the faculties of whites.¹⁶ The musical interlocking has crushed the passionate, instinctive stereotype of African Americans by Milhaud and the Suidois Ballet Company harnessing the passion within African jazz and placing it into the classic work, *La Creation du monde*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Brender, Richard. "Reinventing Africa in Their Own Image: The Ballets Suedois' 'Ballet negre,'" *La Creation du monde*." *Dance Chronicle* 9, no.1 (1986): 121.

¹⁴ Ibid, 128.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Harrison, Daniel. "Bitonality, Pentatonicism, and Diatonicism in a Work by Milhaud." *Music Theory in Concept and Practice* (1997): 398.

In Milhaud's *La Creation du monde* he borrows jazz elements from his first experience in Harlem. In 1922, while visiting New York, he was first exposed to American jazz in its purest form; through independently studying "Black Swan records" he was able to incorporate the short syncopated rhythm characteristic of jazz fusing it with a classically inspired Bach influenced interlude. In the beginning movements, Milhaud acquires a "calm, rhythmically peaceful mood" contrasted with the colorful rhythmically enriched jazz, uniting them and then resolving the two styles "jazz primitive and classic".¹⁷ This careful fusion is "prophetic" in nature by preceding its musical era giving the piece a "unique sense of shape and color" unmatched by his fellow composers.¹⁸

Milhaud was also greatly influenced by anti-Wagnerian modernism of Igor Stravinsky, while denouncing Arnold Schoenberg's 12 tone scale, he drenched his works in polytonality. In the opening bars of *La Creation de monde*, through the medium of alto saxophone Milhaud "superimposes a sinuous D minor melody" over a D major bass line.¹⁹ In this piece, Milhaud decided to enhance the vitality of his music through polytonality creating harmonies that were "more subtly sweet and more violently potent".²⁰ His ability to create dissonant melodies and unstable chord constructions provided the edgy contrast between movements in *La Creation de monde* while maintaining a classical outlook. The compelling mix of the "wailing sax" mingling with the "wild-eyed brashness of the brass section" accompanied by an "x-rated flute solo" are key ingredients in Milhaud's recipe of "edgy brilliance".²¹

¹⁷ Bauer, 149-150.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Teachout, Terry. "Modernism with a Smile." *Commentary* 105, no.4 (April 1998): 48.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Gendron, Bernard. "Jamming at Le Boeuf: Jazz and the Paris Avant-Garde." *Discourse*:

By fusing these gutsy jazz elements together, Milhaud is able to effectively synthesize new and old elements derived from his Baroque past.²² By incorporating a polytonal fugue section into jazz rhythms, he is able to expand his musical horizons twofold, by introducing an edgier element into a classical body. For instance, Milhaud infuses the saxophone with legato, flowing melodies instead of frantic staccato patterns. He then transforms the percussion into a pulsating entity, utilizing its deep timbre as an “undercurrent of tender, suppressed desire”.²³ He then intermingles the piano and percussion disturbing the peaceful timbre to awaken a brassy current with the presence of the sliding trombone line.²⁴ This overture within the piece strays away from Milhaud’s polytonality and instead sways between major and minor keys.²⁵

In comparison to the overture, the fugue incites an “orchestral hailstorm” revealing to the listener the percussive syncopation exhibited by the instruments.²⁶ The sudden transition into the jazz-centered fugue ends with a reincorporation of a “gentle blues melody” closing with a capriccio for two violins against the sharp rise and fall of the piano accompanied by the pounding of the gong and the triumphant, sharp calling of the trumpets as shown in Example 1.²⁷

Yet, in the fugue section, Milhaud uses a dual musical approach mixing the traditional classicism with a hint of jazz artistry. Specifically, in the ballet score, he “hides the fugue” burying it behind layers of piano arpeggios, winds and syncopated percussion passages, as displayed in Example 2. The bass entry in the piece calls attention to the layers of intonation with

Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture 12, no.1 (Fall/Winter 1989): 3.

²² Kelly, Barbara L. *Tradition and Style in the Works of Darius Milhaud 1912-1939*. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), 170.

²³ Collaer, Paul. *Darius Milhaud*. (San Francisco: San Francisco Press, Inc., 1988), 71.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 73.

²⁷ Russ, Michael. “Accounting and Mediating: Modes, Genera, Voice-Leading and Form in Milhaud.” *Music Analysis* 19, no.2 (July 2000): 236.

the unique onset of the fugue.²⁸ However, in the score for piano quintet, Milhaud showcases the “essential fugal elements” while eliminating the piano, and in effect, uncovering the classical technique as shown in Example 3.²⁹

In both passages, Milhaud takes full advantage of his dually themed work; by simply reinserting the jazz elements into a classical context, he is able to effectively change his emphasis and adapt the piece to suit his means (Kelly 174).³⁰ In an attempt to bring out the jazz idiom in the ballet version, Milhaud introduces a double bass solo reinforcing the presence of jazz in the piece. The addition of syncopation in the wind instruments and percussion adds a sense of flare, further contributing to the prominence of jazz. Once again, in the version for piano quintet, Milhaud “reveals the importance of instrumentation” displaying his classical intentions which parallels Stravinsky’s *Les Noces* in each composer’s search for a “particular sonority for the ballet”.³¹

Next, the piece transitions into a dance-like concertino led by the clarinet with countermelodies within the piano and percussion. At this point in time, the music appears to “burst into a rhythmic tempest” resounding with a bell-like timbre, yet the piece lacks the presence of bells as revealed in Example 4.³² As the saxophone reenters, it creates a stunning whirlwind of tonality taking place over seven measures; this phenomena begins as the wind

²⁸ Kelly, 171.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 174.

³¹ Sprout, Leslie A. Review: “Tradition and Style in the Works of Darius Milhaud, 1912-1939.”

Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association 60, no.4 (June 2004): 944.

³² Collaer, 73.

instruments whisk away the entire orchestra into a sounded tremolo leaving the saxophone with a final unresolved appoggiatura as depicted in Example 5.³³

Milhaud's *La Creation du monde* represents his most musically involved work as well as "sophisticated use of his musical past".³⁴ By effectively blending the classicism of the era with the spontaneity of jazz, he has blazed his own path as an innovative composer, showing great promise in his mastery of 'musical mingling'. His ability to unite tradition and culture with a modern twist has not only revolutionized musical style but aided in the globalization of musical composition, expanding the possibilities for musical collaboration.

The emotional intensity of the piece is further drawn from syncopation inspired by African rhythms, while intermixing classical components to out-of-the-ordinary instrumentation.³⁵ By infusing classical components of polytonality and basic chromaticism with African jazz, *La Creation du monde* moves beyond a political work marrying two cultures and uniting two distinct musical styles. The intermingling of French ballet and African jazz adds an unparalleled vitality to the music, bringing new life the compositional world and renewing our sense of international unity, testing the nationalism of the era.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wagner, Alan. "Jazz Influences in the Twentieth Century Symphonic Wind Literature." *Kongressberichte Bad Waltersdorf/Steiermark* (2003): 523.

³⁵ Collaer, 71.

