

Influence of Jazz Music on Stravinsky's Ebony Concerto

To talk about the influence of Jazz on 20th century's classical repertoire, according to a lecture with the title of "Jazz influences in Twentieth-Century Symphonic Band Literature" by Dr. Alan Wagner, director of Southern Methodist University, in 2003, there is a large list of pieces which are influenced by jazz and they are also strongly valuable for wind ensemble. It is remarkable to mention some of the well-known "jazz-influenced" pieces in the 20th century such as *La creation du monde* by Milhaud in 1923; *Rhapsody in Blue* by Gershwin in 1924 (in its original band orchestration); *Ebony Concerto* by Stravinsky in 1945 and *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* by Bernstein in 1949. (Catherine Parsonage, 2003)

These works are so dissimilar despite being categorized under the title of "jazz-influenced" as they both characterize European and American reply to Jazz while it was quite young in the 1920s and when it was approaching maturity in the 1940s and due to the difference like the Jazz influence on the composers and the way this demonstrates itself musically, an individual and informed approach to each work is suggested. But it seems that what is common in these pieces is the idea of 'standard' ensemble formats which is defined traditionally and its stylistic conventions is accepted, rather than any deliberate prejudice on the part of conductors and programmers. (Catherine Parsonage, 2006) of styles contained by its music. Hence, it could be considered as the mainly well-matched forum for jazz-influenced works to be understood and performed. Also, the experience of jazz through performance can be valued in approaching jazz-influenced works, and the great amount of quality of jazz ensemble music, historic and modern, is a significant part of modern wind

repertoire that can be abandoned in favor of music that seeks "symphonic" status. Basically, in the wind ensemble world, the most thrilling possibilities result from the flexibility of the medium.

Jazz was the outcome of the confrontation of two worlds. It was the contact of the rhythmic and vocally modal native musical traditions and the harmonic conventions of the West. In the first two decades of the twentieth century while the black man in America was creating music to reflect his powerful protest against withdrawal and nostalgia for 'the beauty of his wild forebears', Stravinsky, a cosmopolitan European, was looking for renewal through a revived primitivism, turning away from the waning artistic traditions of nineteenth-century romanticism. For an improvising Negro jazzman to find his primitive strength was creating tension with the harmonic and tonal prison of the West whereas Stravinsky attempted to push away these contracts by being rhythmically reborn.

Undeniably as a European having centuries of tradition and customs behind him, only by being self-consciously unselfconscious, he could rediscover the primitive: as is specified that *The Rite of Spring* was a triumphant achievement of nineteenth-century industrialism and was scored for a mammoth symphony orchestra, however viciously Stravinsky might employ predictable instruments in disobedience of what had come to be acknowledged as their 'true' natures. Even though the sound of a peasant orchestra is emulated in *The Wedding* and authentic peasant instruments were used, he does not false that the symbolized ritual is 'real'; any longer that is the sacrificial murder of *The Rite*. Both works are ballets, portraying games of 'let's pretend'. Our forgotten liveliness is reminded to us in these two pieces, but

their therapeutic and negative value removes us from the violence of the war years, which is stronger than their positive cancelation of missing power. (Wilfrid Mellers, 2010)

Similar to some of the European classical composers, Stravinsky's knowledge of jazz music was derived from scores and sheets in jazz music. Although he was an active composer, he claimed that he did not hear any performances of early jazz music before 1918 and he only had seen a few numbers of printed copies of piano rags, while the Negro's challenge was to make 'respectable' music in conventionality with the white traditions of march and quadrille. (Wilfrid Mellers, 1967)

It is believed that for a cosmopolitan artist like Stravinsky, it is implausible that he had never heard the sound of early jazz which was called "cakewalk" and "ragtime", though it lasted only about twenty years until its decline around 1917. After this date, Rag music and its precursor, the cakewalk was labeled as "Jazz". Meanwhile, Published music scores of rags, cakewalk and two- steps were the sources that the majority of European classical composers encountered early jazz. From 1983 on, Stravinsky had been having frequent trips to Europe and also between 1910 and 1916 due to performances and rehearsals of his work, he lived in Paris, Rome, London, and Berlin and also because of World War I, he lived in exile in Switzerland and could not back to his homeland for several years. (Barbara B. Heyman, 1982)

The factors that assisted the popularity of American music in Europe were piano roll and the cylinder roll, the latter was an invention of Thomas Edison in 1877. Another great influence of American ragtime was John Philip Sousa, who held four tours around Europe.

Since Stravinsky composed in different ranges from jazz to serialism, he was a main musical trend of composition in the 20th century. He composed some jazz-influenced pieces and *Ebony Concerto* is the one that he mentioned as his favorite among them. He continued to compose irregularly on jazz techniques after the years of the First World War, but it was not till 1945 that Stravinsky composed *Ebony concerto* which is another full-scale jazz composition.

As he did a self-study through jazz sheets music, one of the basic elements in jazz music is a rhythmic liveliness and its tentative character. Pieces like "*Ragtime*", "*L'Histoire du soldat*" and "*Piano Rag Music*" all present the rhythmic essence of jazz music. (Richard Lawn, 2007) Yet he used jazz music's rhythmic style as the way that it was written but not as played. (Barbara B. Heyman, 1982) The syncopation of the self-confident rhythms of dance or march could disturb Rag boldly and a bit riskily nevertheless could never manifest the crucial characteristic of jazz-the creative pressure between a freely pitched and rhythmmed solo line and the consistency of the beat and the stiffness of western harmony. For Stravinsky, Rag sounded like pianola rolls and was commonly recorded on them; Stravinsky created his works for pianola relatively contemporaneously with his ragtime pieces. (Wilfrid Mellers, 1967)

The *Soldier's Tale* is Stravinsky's first piece to use Jazz techniques. The scoring of this piece is similar to the New Orleans or Dixieland band, Though, more possibly he took it from the street bands of Europe and Eric Satie had employed a similar group for his *Le Pieu de Meduse* as early as 1913. Still, Stravinsky gives a sharp satirical note to the cheerful sound of the Dixieland and here he associates jazz with the value of denial, in *The*

Soldier's Tale Devil corrupts the hero and finishes his soul with a mesmerizing boogie rhythm and disruptive syncopation. The obsessive boogie thrust halts the marrow_ instead of redeeming the body, which is described as anti-jazz. The lyrical and rhythmic energy of classic New Orleans jazz is remote from the music; but it is not a criticism of Stravinsky's amazing score, which intentionally exploits jazz in this 'negative capability'. (Wilfrid Mellers, 1967) His first piece of intellectual and non-theatrical jazz was followed just after *The Soldier's Tale* named *Ragtime*. It was composed for eleven instruments (clarinet, horn, flute, trombone, cornet, two violins, viola, double bass, cimbalom and percussion) and it was not considered much more than an appendix to the devilish jazz fiddle-music, the only new element being the prominent concentrate part given to the cimbalom again having an anti-jazz spirit lacking lyrical impulse. The *Piano Rag Music* of the following year in 1919 has more positive virtues because it sprang from the composer's pleasure in the percussive possibilities of the piano. Whereas the clusters of 'added notes' were derived from the tango and rag in *The Soldier's Tale*, they are treated more expansively in pianistic form and Stravinsky even said that he was wishing the music to sound improvised. To inspire this effect, he noted much of the piece without bar-lines and played with fitting abandon even though he did not have any experience of this unlettered and hardly notable music.

After traveling between Switzerland and Paris several times, he became a French citizen in 1934 finally and lived in Paris. During his final years in Paris, he continued his professional connections with important people and orchestras in the USA. Through the improvement and development of his professional relationships in the USA, he was offered to give lectures at Harvard University during the 1939-1940 academic year and also, he was

working on *Symphony in C* for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as well. Therefore, it was easier for him to move to the USA with these connections.

Stravinsky moved to the USA in 1939, and to survive, he got into money-making music. In pieces like *Tango* in 1940, *Circus Polka* in 1941 and *Scherzo*, it seems that he adjusts his composition style to stick into particular briefs. Through this logic, there is a break with this derivative attitude of commercial composition in this period Which took place by composing *Ebony Concerto* meanwhile. He was eager to move away from the imitative approach to popular music. During this process, a higher level of understanding of the cultural aspects in jazz music became more important and on the other hand, simply fitting in some musical details of jazz into his piece became less highlighted for him. It could be said that *Ebony Concerto* is a combination of jazz elements and his musical language. Therefore, *Ebony Concerto* is not a piece which is written by Stravinsky's forced adaptation style to jazz.

To get more into details about *Ebony Concerto*, it should be mentioned that it was a commission by Woody Herman and Stravinsky finished it in 1945 in the same year he became an American resident. Herman's Band was the first performer of *Ebony Concerto* in Carnegie Hall the next year. It is possible to call the *Ebony Concerto* the most successful and convincing of Stravinsky's Jazz work; but the point is, it is not successful because of its genre; it is a successful piece due to Stravinsky's power of composition.

Ebony Concerto is not a money-making piece and can be seen as a separate work from those compositions he composed to survive in the USA. It has Stravinsky's approach of

using jazz elements by his words in a classical way. In short, *Ebony Concerto* was composed by his inspiration from jazz rather than a piece that is only featured by jazz elements. The way Stravinsky used jazz elements in *Ebony Concerto* is very clever. In his dialogue with Robert Craft in 1968 with the title of "Jazz Commercials", some of the clues of his thoughts and compositional attitudes were revealed. It is surprisingly strange that although Stravinsky is a composer who was aware of the existence of improvisation in jazz music and also appreciated improvisers including Charlie Parker, Art Tatum and Charles Christian, he composed a jazz-influenced piece without any improvisation inside while he wanted it to sound like an improvisation, even though he was qualified for the achievement of his composition because of finding his characteristic of jazz.

As Stravinsky's "non-musical pieces for piano solo and clarinet solo" is referred to the title of "written-out portraits of improvisation", *Ebony Concerto* could be assumed a written-out portrait of jazz. Besides, the be-bop which Stravinsky was influenced by, despite keeping his musical language, had affected the piano and solo clarinet in the first movement and they can be named as good examples of "written out improvisation". In the performance of *Ebony Concerto* conducted by the composer himself, a certain freedom is seen in wind players who had taken a jazz approach and a range of (non-notated) articulations and also some "swung" quavers were incorporated. The idea of performing not-notated elements is derived from Stravinsky's opinion that "jazz performance is more interesting than jazz composition".

It is remarkable to say that "Ebony" does not stand for Clarinet and *Ebony Concerto* is not a clarinet concerto. It is named *Ebony concerto* because of Herman who

used to play clarinet in his band, not to show the instrument by a conscious decision. Besides, "Concerto grosso" was marked by the "concerto" idea as Stravinsky affirmed. There are some aspects of the *Ebony concerto* that can relieve the "classical" approach in it. For instance, the sonata-type form can be seen in the first movement. Furthermore, the form that he used for the second movement is the simple binary. Also, themes and variations are the approaches to form in the third movement.

On the other hand, the instrumentation of *Ebony Concerto* is a "classical" approach which is the Incorporation of harp and French horn with extended big band orchestration. Although he used piano, guitar, bass and percussion, it seems that Stravinsky did not write for a "rhythmic section" and they just function as an extra instrumental color. Hence, in general, the Instrumentation and form of *Ebony Concerto* can show the root of the work in its usual "classical" structures.

Besides all of the "classical" aspects mentioned previously, there are some signs which present *Ebony Concerto* as jazz and blues-influenced composition. He claimed that "Ebony does not mean Clarinet", but "African". He continued his explanation of the title of the piece with what blues meant to him as "blues meant African to me". (Catherine Parsonage, 2006) The piece, especially in the second and third movement, was influenced by blues much more compared to contemporary be-bop. In the second movement, tenor and baritone saxophone and harmon muted trumpets present a blues-influenced melody like an echo among each other. Also, the simple theme in the last movement is inspired by blues as well and only four pitches are used which function as prominent minor 3rd. An initial variation (Con moto) seems cordic, burlesque, with chattering clarinets, glissandi and flutter

tonguing in the brass. The work is essentially a new-baroque concerto and a minor complement to the contemporary in Three Movements and to build up progressive tension, it employs jazzy rhythmic alteration. The first movement of the *Ebony Concerto* is a funny compliment to the tragedy of the Symphony in Three Movements with the addition of French horns to Herman's normal big band resources. The first subject is that it is in Orthodox classical sonata form consisting of the unclear syncopated treatment of a trumpety trumpet fanfare. The second subject, traditionally cantabile, is first given to solo trombone then to solo clarinet and is in the subdominant rather than the conventional dominant. In the home key of B flat, the cantabile tune increasingly triumphs over the disrupted fanfares and at the end is heard on trumpet; so far, the tune is so wittily corny that its apotheosis sounds slightly sarcastic. This piece is not mainly 'blue' (as is claimed by the composer), except in so far it repeats blue false relations. However, the slowly irritating exfoliation of the melody sounds are more middle eastern than negroid; neither rhythmically nor lyrically can the tune 'take off'. The music is lacking what jazzmen call 'flight' and probably that is why it seems enormously ancient and melancholy- a quality that we may associate with eastern cultures and with the Russian plains, but barely with the American Negro. (Wilfrid MeHers, 1967)

Something of this feeling endures in the final variation set: the theme itself is an undulation of pentatonic minor thirds that could not be more bygone primitive, though the rhythms and figurations remind the clown-like antics of the first movement. The coda, after the corybantic, is unambiguous in the extreme: in Stravinsky's typical telescoping of tonic, time stops, dominant and subdominant- in the norms of progression in European music.

Woody Herman's band did not enjoy playing Stravinsky's concerto, for its virtues are not those of jazz, and probably the composer did not expect them to. Yet its virtues are considerable, so the bigger pity is that with the way its instrumentation is, performances are certain to be uncommon.

In summary, *Ebony Concerto* should not be seen in the category of the jazz genre, as it is a "jazz-influenced" piece. Due to this fact, there are limits to the extent to which improvisation can be part of performances deprived of the integrity of the composition itself being wrecked. Even on classical formal conventions, there are some similarities between *Ebony concerto* and his next composition, *Concerto in D* for string orchestra, which indicate the composer's style. The *Ebony concerto* is believed not to be composed for financial purposes and is seen as a part of his compositional development rather than a diverting but money-wise satisfying sideline as the earlier popular pieces had been. *Ebony Concerto* was a piece for avoiding a popular music approach and it was a new start to represent the composer's language of composition but this time with an inspiration of jazz.

References:

Banks, Don. "Converging Streams." *The Musical Times*, Vol. 111, no. 1528, 1917, pp. 596-599.

B. Heyman, Barbara. "Stravinsky and Ragtime." *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 4, 1982, pp. 543-562.

Lawn, Richard. "Experiencing Jazz." *The Relation of Jazz to Western Classical Music*, New York City: McGraw-Hill, 2007.

Parsonage, Catherine. "Approaching Ebony Concerto." 2006, pp. 10-11, http://www.basbwe.net/images/2011/06/05spring_stravinsky.pdf

Parsonage, Catherine. "Approaching jazz-influenced wind music." 2003, pp. 79-94, http://www.wasbe.orgiuploads/WASBE_10_2003_-_Approaching-Jazz-Influenced-WindMusic.pdf.

"Stravinsky & Jazz - BBC Radio 3 Jazz-on-3 feature." *YouTube*, uploaded by thenoiseitmakes, 27 Dec 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJwzhpw-D8M>.

Mellers, Wilfrid. "Stravinsky and Jazz." *Tempo*, no. 81, 1967, pp. 29-31