

Primitivism in Early 20th Century French Music: Darius Milhaud's *La création du monde*

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Abstract: *The first decades of the 20th century, particularly the post-war era, brought about numerous philosophical and cultural changes. Exoticism and orientalism were concepts that still governed arts and music, however the philosophical concepts that lay beyond the use of exotic or oriental themes was gradually altered. Exoticism represented more than the possibility for artists to create an idealized elsewhere, inspired by the contact with foreign cultures and their artistic products. It also offered artists the opportunity to express the complex meaning of various symbols associated with exoticism. In this context, Western society gradually turned toward a new aesthetic that could provide artists with an apparent connection to the roots of mankind. Primitivism, associated with folk art and mythology, represented a utopic state, prior to civilization or colonialism, but at the same time, it offered the possibility to explore certain archetypal symbols and express their possible meaning through art. Art nègre, represented by African and African American art and music, was most often associated with this aesthetic of primitivism, and influenced the works of Western artists. French composer Darius Milhaud returns to the theme of origins and creation in the work *La création du monde*, which combines elements associated with the concept of primitivism, with jazz music and Western compositional techniques.*

Key-words: *primitivism, African art, jazz, rhythm, French*

1. Introduction: The Aesthetics of Primitivism in Late 19th Century and Early 20th Century Western Art

In response to the decadent aesthetic of the *fin de siècle*, artists gradually turned their attention to societies deemed primitive, considering that these possessed moral and ethical values that were superior to those of the civilized Western society. This perspective resulted in an idealized aesthetics of primitivism, artists

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aiming to recreate an *experience* associated with a place, time, and people that were yet untainted by the decadent traits of modern civilization.

Primitivism is also associated with folk art and mythology, European artists striving to incorporate motifs pertaining to Asian or African art in their works. Borrowing motifs and creating techniques that aim to suggest foreign cultures was important for the development of Modern art. Although primitivism can be associated with such movements as *exoticism*, it gradually departs from the principles of exotic or orientalist art: the idea behind exoticism and orientalism was to suggest displacement from the familiar surroundings and to evoke an exotic elsewhere where anything was possible, while primitivism deals rather with *symbols and the meaning behind certain representations* that are “clean”, frank, and straightforward.

In painting, *primitivism* may be associated with the works of such painters as Paul Gauguin or Pablo Picasso, as well as with the incorporation of techniques and motifs borrowed from folk art.

The interest of Parisian artists regarding primitivism and cultures deemed as primitive was deeply influenced by the First World War. During the War and the post-War era, numerous intellectuals considered that Western modernity was responsible for the barbarism of war, turning instead towards the utopian image of primitive societies that were not yet tainted by modernity and colonialism. Many exhibitions promoted African art and culture, with artists striving either to imitate the style of these artworks, or to express the complexity of primitive art (Rhodes 1994, 7). These influences manifested in music as well, with composers incorporating elements that suggest the image of primitive rituals: polyrhythms, modal scales, or harsh timbres. French composer Darius Milhaud (1892 – 1974), influenced by the philosophical ideas of his era, as well as such concepts as primitivism, African art, and jazz music, composed in 1923 *La création du monde*, Op.81a, a ballet in which the creation of the world is represented, as described in African folk mythology. The composer’s direct contact with jazz music led to the creation of a work that goes beyond the imitation of African art or the suggestion of primitive elements, striving to reveal the meaning behind symbols.

2. Primitivism in Music

Even though artistic and musical Primitivism is most often considered a product of Western art, the philosophical concept that lies at the heart of this cultural phenomenon is based on non-Western artworks. At the same time, Primitivism poses itself against Western colonialism, thus criticizing the stereotypes related to

exoticism and orientalism. Primitivism firmly believes that certain colonized regions were flourishing before Western colonization, emphasizing the negative impact of modernity, and yearning for a certain utopian original state of circumstances. Nonetheless, it is worth asking whether Western Primitivist art (inspired by the art of primitive societies) manages to distinguish itself from the colonial stereotypes associated with exoticism (Etherington 2018).

In the 1920's and 30's, French artists and intellectuals displayed a growing interest in African artworks, creating an idealized image of a pre-colonial Africa, that was seen as thriving before European colonialism. The approach was known as the *Négritude movement* and resulted in the incorporation of African motifs in art. This movement may be recognized in the African period of Pablo Picasso and in the works of other artists associated with the painter, such as Cuban artist Witfredo Lam.

Beyond the creation of naïve artworks or departing from the rules of Western art and music composition, primitivism strives to evoke the pre-societal harmony of a mythical space and time. In music, primitivism may suggest rituals associated to various stages of the human existence, as illustrated by Igor Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* (1913), a work based on repetitive rhythmic patterns and harsh dissonance, evoking the image of a primitive ritual. The gradual breakdown of the tonal system and the composers' growing interest in modal scales may also be understood as their desire to abandon the rules of Western music composition and the return to an ancient, more sincere type of musical expression.

The polyrhythms of African music were of particular interest for certain composers, who rose against musical Impressionism, preferring a musical discourse that features strong rhythmic pulse and the use of musical modes and well-defined musical ideas.

3. Primitivism, African Influences, and Jazz in *La création du monde*

In the context of music, *primitivism* describes the blending of aspects from non-Western, frequently tribal, or archaic, musical traditions. Early 20th-century composers, such as Milhaud, found inspiration in the unadulterated and primal qualities they heard in music from non-Europeans.

French composer Darius Milhaud studied at the Paris Conservatoire, where he met several of his future colleagues of the group *Les Six* – which also included Georges Auric (1899–1983), Louis Durey (1888–1979), Arthur Honegger (1892–1955), Francis Poulenc (1899–1963), and Germaine Tailleferre (1892–1983). The group of composers lived and worked in Montparnasse and their music was

conceived as a neoclassic reaction against other styles of the period (Wagnerian music and Impressionism). However, the style of the six composers was not similar, which makes it difficult to trace a common aesthetic.

Apart from the influences of European music and contemporary composers, Milhaud was greatly influenced by non-Western art and music, such as Brazilian music or jazz music. Between 1917 and 1919, Milhaud travelled to Brazil, as secretary to the French ambassador. His sojourn in Brazil influenced Milhaud, who composed works inspired by Brazilian music.

With its roots in African music, jazz music had a strong influence on the work of the French composer. Milhaud's encounters with jazz music in Paris and America inspired the composer to incorporate the timbres and powerful rhythms of jazz in his chamber music: *Caramel Mou* (1920) and *Trois Rag-Caprices* (1922). However, it was in 1923 with the work *La création du monde*, that Milhaud could employ all these elements and achieve a stylistic synthesis that went beyond the mere use of foreign elements aimed to render the musical discourse more interesting. In *La création du monde* the composer returns to a primitive time and space, imagining a musical rendition of the creation.

Despite the fact that he was already familiar with jazz music, from his previous Parisian encounters with this genre, it was during his trips to the United States, in 1918, 1922, and 1926, that Milhaud had the opportunity to hear authentic jazz music, ranging from New Orleans jazz to the music played in Harlem. The composer was intrigued by the stylistic differences that he noticed between European popular dance music and the *new music from America* (Baskerville 1965, 118), which had a powerful impact on the composer and his compositional style. *La création du monde* was completed following the 1922 trip, the composer employing elements borrowed from jazz music.

Sharing certain lyrical traits that resemble Milhaud's Jewish and Mediterranean roots, jazz music was the perfect source of inspiration for the French composer, whose aim was to discover elements that could revive French music and have a positive impact on its evolution.

4. Stylistic characteristics in *La création du monde*

Upon his return to France, Milhaud will make use of the jazz style he had encountered, however he does so by conveying *a purely classical feeling*, as the following analysis will reveal.

The pinnacle of the Négritude movement and negrophilia that governed the high arts and the popular culture of the 1920's, the ballet La Création du monde

embodies the fundamental concepts of the primitive aesthetic, freely blending African and African American cultural allusions. The work represents the exceptional collaboration between Darius Milhaud, the writer Blaise Cendrars (who created the libretto), the dancer and choreographer Jean Börlin, and painter Fernand Léger (who created the costumes, decoration, and scenery of the stage). In a letter addressed to Rolf de Maré, Léger emphasized the uniqueness of the work, stating that «*il devra être le seul ballet nègre possible dans le monde entier et être celui qui restera comme typique du genre...*» (Freeman 1995, 106). Léger's costumes were of African inspiration, while the decoration and scenery dominated the stage, with six-metre-high figures.

As previously stated, when speaking about primitivism in arts, two directions may be observed: the imitation of the artworks of societies deemed primitive is one of these possible directions, while the other is a subtle attempt to express the hidden meaning beneath the symbolism of primitive art. Milhaud's work reflects this second approach, an idea that is also supported by the fact that prior to their collaboration all the artists involved in the genesis of this ballet had direct contact with the African culture: Milhaud had listened to the jazz music played by African and African American musicians, Léger and Börlin carried out ethnographic researches (Watkins, 1994,122), while Cendrars had travelled to Africa, a trip that resulted in the work published *L'Anthologie nègre*, published in 1921.

The storyline of the ballet, which was modelled after the biblical account of the Genesis, was allegedly inspired by the myths of the Fang people, who lived in what was then the French Congo in West Central Africa. The approach of such a theme as the creation of the world connected the French colonial endeavour to the post-World War I revitalization of the country. *La création du monde* elaborates an African creation myth of the earth, its plants and animals, and the First Man and First Woman. Milhaud's distinct bitonal language fused with the mixed-mode *blue* notes of American jazz to create a harmonic vocabulary (Milhaud, 1953). The two main instruments are the oboe, which elaborates multiple blues melodies and suggests the voice of the gods creating new life on earth, and the alto saxophone, which opens and closes the work.

The libretto of the ballet guides the audience through the entire process of creation, from the primary silence and stillness that envelop the infinite chaos, to the dance of the created beings, and the loud triumph when the First Man and Woman finally give in to their love. Fluttering flutes and a subtle dissonance in the alto saxophone lead to the conclusion of the work.

Paradoxically, the least dominant element of the ballet is dance: the dancers wore masks and were completely hidden beneath large, bidimensional costumes made of painted cardboard, which aimed to animate this moving depiction. It is

interesting to note that the movements of the dancers were devised independently from the rhythm of the music, and their constant movement was meant to evoke the inexorable rhythm of modern life (Watkins 1994, 118).

The ballet is divided into four parts and lasts approximately 20 minutes. Despite its few representations, it gained popularity as piece performed by chamber orchestras (Dorris 1999, 197.) *La Création du monde* was first represented on 25 October 1923 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and was followed by harsh reviews, the critics declaring that Milhaud's music was rather appropriate for a restaurant or dance hall than for a concert hall (Gendron 2002, 101). Nonetheless, nowadays the works is considered among the best works of the composer.

4.1. Jazz influences as means for representing primitivism

Milhaud wrote *La Création du monde* for 20 instruments: two flutes, oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, alto saxophone, horn, trumpets, trombone, tuba, timpani, two percussionists, two violins, cello, double bass, and piano.

The percussion instruments reveal the ongoing influence of Milhaud's time in Brazil, as well as the exotic setting of the ballet, with pieces like wood and metal blocks, tambourine, snare drum, tenor, and bass drum, timpani, cowbell, and cymbals. The percussion provides a syncopated backbeat for the majority of the faster sections, while the piano mostly provides accompaniment and only occasionally displays melodic material. The pulsating beats and lively rhythms further emphasize the idea of the primal energy (associated with the creation of the world), an aspect that is frequently connected to exoticism. Apart from rhythm, the exoticism of the work is suggested by the modal system employed by the composer.

In the fourth section of the work, within the dance of desire (Fig. 1), the clarinet opens the section with a melody in improvisational style, resembling jazz improvisations. The line is set against the syncopated rhythm played by the piano, saxophone, and strings. This syncopation provides the section with a jazz swing. Another similarity to jazz music is the fact that throughout the work the piano is often treated as rhythmic instrument, providing strong rhythmic patterns.

In *La création du monde*, jazz influences are carefully integrated to effectively convey the wild, primal, and energizing aspects of primitivism. The composer confessed: "*I adopted the same orchestra as used in Harlem, seventeen solo instruments, and I made wholesale use of the jazz style to convey a purely classical feeling*" (Milhaud 1995, 118).

Fig. 1. Darius Milhaud: "La Création du monde (1923) »
(Excerpt: beginning of the IVth section, marked 35)

The inventiveness and boundary-pushing quality of Milhaud's work are enhanced by the blending of various musical elements, including ragtime, blues, syncopated music, and American and French dance music, rather than just one specific jazz subgenre. He observed that the individual melodic lines, the continuous use of syncopation, resulted in contrapuntal complexity, and his use of a fugue with a syncopated subject demonstrates this experience. Despite the fact that syncopation is used throughout the piece, it is most noticeable in Sections I and IV, making them the most rhythmic (as shown in the excerpt from Fig.1). As a result, Milhaud separates the two sections from the remainder of the work by using timbre and rhythm.

While the libretto, costumes, and decor suggest the influence of African art and African primitivism, fashionable in the early 1920's, Milhaud's music mirrors a quite different, but nonetheless just as popular influence, that of jazz music: harmonic progressions and blues scales, melodic formulae, rhythmic patterns, an orchestra that resembles the set-up of jazz bands, and performing techniques inspired by jazz music, to name only a few of these influences. Because most

contemporary composers had failed to demonstrate the potentialities of jazz when incorporating elements of this genre into their works, Milhaud believed that jazz was an innovative art form that could tell a story and that contemporary composers should support its sonorous and rhythmic innovations for the concert setting (Gendron 2002, 87).

In order to create a vibrant and exotic musical atmosphere in *La Création du Monde*, Darius Milhaud uses non-Western modes and scales. The use of these modes and scales gives the composition a distinctive flavour. Thus, the pentatonic scale is used to evoke a sense of exoticism and non-Western tones, while the use of whole-tone scales, can create a dreamlike or exotic quality.

As previously mentioned, the use of bitonalities is one of the features that distinguished Milhaud's compositional style (Hansen, 1967). The composer employs this polytonal technique throughout the opening section of the ballet:

Fig. 2. Darius Milhaud: « *La Création du monde* (1923) »
(Excerpt from the 1st section of the work, bars 44-50)

The example displays the juxtaposition of an A-minor tonal center (in the first two bars of the excerpt from Fig. 2), with the C-sharp in the saxophone line, followed by a similar minor-major juxtaposition of the D-minor and D-major scales (in the fourth bar of the example), as suggested by the cross-relation between F-natural (saxophone), F-sharp (clarinet), and B-flat (violins and flutes). The use of bitonality may allude to the state of being that precedes creation, when man and woman have not yet been separated (with the minor scale associated with the feminine, and the major with the masculine). The cross-relation between the major and minor suggests the very process of creation, the gradual separation of forms and genders (Mawer 2014, 114).

Milhaud was copying a modern form of music, in which the African influence had already been absorbed when he used jazz, but there is clear evidence of imitation of "primitive" sources and their assimilation into modern art. Jazz, developed in the 1920's, was unique in that it provided "primitive" elements in a way that was easily understood, replicated, and directly experienced by Europeans. Because jazz was based on standard instruments and musical principles, it "*became a cultural shorthand for that which was both supremely modern and, through its African roots, connected with the exotic origins of things*" (Lively 1998, 99).

5. Conclusions

The work represents an excellent example regarding the use of African influences in early 20th century French music. A deep analysis of the work reveals the manner in which Milhaud was influenced by jazz music in this work: elements pertaining to jazz music are present in various parts of the work, but the echoes of these are subtle, suggesting their presence in the deeper layers of the entire ballet.

Two complementary influences are juxtaposed in Milhaud's work: African art and American jazz. During the 1920's African American and Africa culture and art were often fused or confused. It was only after the war that African art and popular American music enjoyed considerable success and popularity, due to their innovative features, modernity, and exoticism, derived from the association with African culture. African American culture was often seen as an extension of the genuine African culture, while the deeper meaning of jazz music often remained hidden.

In a cultural context that failed to see the deeper meaning of the jazz genre, Darius Milhaud was one of the few artists who understood that jazz, as an exotic form of art, needs to be respected. He did not try to imitate, but rather to honour jazz music in his compositions. Milhaud understood that jazz represents more than a simple form of entertainment, instead it reveals the roots of African culture. This

idea is mirrored in the manner in which he employs jazz elements in *La Création du monde*, a work inspired by African mythology, in order to evoke the creation of the world. The ballet proves that the influences of jazz music on other musical genres is frequently deeper than the plain addition of elements pertaining to it. This emphasizes how crucial it is to understand music analytically and contextually.

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