

The Saxophone, orientations and stylistic directions in French music of the 20th century *Lamento et Ronde* – Pierre Sancan

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Abstract: *For some, the tendency to think that the saxophone is an American instrument is very high, due to the fact that it is a true symbol of jazz. For others it is of Belgian origin, as its inventor was born in Dinant – Belgium. However, the saxophone originated and evolved in Paris.*

With a strong emotional impact, characterized by a tension of substance due to the tonal ambiguity suggested by the evolved chromaticism, “Lamento et Rondo” is the result of an advanced compositional thinking, which subjects the melody to a modulating variational work through thematic development procedures typical of the 20th century.

Key-words: *saxophone, Paris, tonal, chromaticism, instrument*

1. Introduction

Officially one of the last musical instruments called “mechanical”, the saxophone crosses over 180 years of classical music, including late romanticism, impressionism, neoclassicism, atonal music, serial music, expressionism, contemporary avant-garde music, but also jazz with its derivatives, ancient music, rock, pop, punk, folk music, not to mention the impossible to classify styles, born from the most unusual combinations. We can say that precisely this plurality of styles ensures the popularity of the saxophone.

Although it appeared much too late to be definitively integrated into the symphony orchestra, the saxophone takes advantage of its popularity to access all forms of culture and discover new techniques. This instrument, object of all travesties, is defended by musicians with immense energy, born of the desire for

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recognition. Thus, especially in France, all performers promote their instrument, sometimes to the detriment of the music they play, an unprecedented attitude in the history of music.

2. Interpretation in French style

The impact of “black music” on French artistic creation is considerable in the case of young artists, composers, choreographers or poets. Even if it rarely goes beyond the circle of intellectuals, the thirst for jazz is oversized, representing an art of living. Thus, attracted by the prestige of Paris, many American musicians settle here, while publications and records promote Afro-American music in France, which becomes the second country of this genre (Berendt 1963).

At the end of the 1920s, Stéphane Grapelli, famous as a violinist (he also played the piano and the saxophone) and the manouche-style guitarist Django Reinhardt announced the formation of a legendary orchestra, the Hot Club de France quintet. Thus, French jazz was born.

When we talk about today's jazz, we don't even count the musical genres derived from the original aesthetic, from the time when jazz bands ensured the success of the saxophone in Paris, at the beginning of the 20th century; the saxophone can be heard everywhere: ragtime and Dixieland, blues, be-bop, hard-bop, acid jazz, mainstream, modal jazz, manouche jazz, free-jazz, smooth jazz, jazz-rock fusion, middle jazz, swing, no jazz, jazz-funk, Latin jazz, west coast jazz, Afro-Cuban jazz, cool-jazz, groove, traditional jazz, etc. (Grove 1954).

For the saxophone, this century begins with three concert works of consistent musical interest: Vincent d'Indy's *Lyric Choral varié* (Varied Choral) (1903), Debussy's famous *Rhapsody* (1904) and Florent Schmitt's *Legend* (1918). But these composers were not motivated by a special affinity for the saxophone. In fact, the three compositions were commissioned by Elizabeth Hall, a wealthy American music lover, born in Paris in 1853.

The resounding success of the Paris Saxophone Quartet, created by Marcel Mule in 1928, generated an important number of works for this group, including Aleksandr Glazunov's *B-flat Quartet* (1932) and *Introduction et variations sur une ronde populaire* (Introduction and variations on a folk dance) by Gabriel Pierné (1937). Beside them, the quartets written in the 19th century by Jerome Savari, Rodolphe Kreutzer, Léon Escudier, Adolphe Sellenick or Jean Baptiste Singelée pale (Delage 1992).

In 1933, Al. Glazunov dedicates to Sigurd Rasher one of the most famous monuments of the classical saxophone repertoire: the *Concerto in E flat for alto*

saxophone, in one part. Because of his notoriety, around fifty concert works are dedicated to Rasher, including the famous *Concertino da Camera* by Jacques Ibert (1935), for alto saxophone and small orchestra of 11 instruments.

The repertoire of the instrument is continuously growing. More works were written in 40 years than in the previous 140 years, an obvious sign of enthusiasm. In 1985, around 6,700 works were recorded, of which 90% were written after 1930. Most concern the repertoire for saxophone and piano. (Fennell, 1954)

It is enough to study French scores for saxophone to understand that musical aesthetics in France is synonymous with miniaturism. Let us observe the multiple articulations and the delicate legato of Jacques Ibert's *Concertino da camera*, the melody of Claude Debussy's *Rhapsody*, the restrained phrasing and dynamics of Betsy Jolas's serialism, the humour and playful rhythms of Jean Francaix's *Exotic Dances* or the shy expression of the prelude of Alfred Desenclos, in order to understand that the performer can display neither a clear virtuosity nor an overflowing expression.

The French saxophonist plays with a certain restraint. We distinguish it by a wide palette of dynamics, accompanied by a great clarity of articulations, a perfect respect for the text, a round and sustained sonority. Many other typical national parameters are added, doubled by an attitude recognized by an introverted presence, a "full of modesty" or even shy relationship with the stage, up to a sometimes austere concert outfit - in any case, less colourful than that of the northern neighbours or of the Americans (Rorive 2004).

In 1845, saxophonists were said to play with sounds that made "ua-ua-ua-ua", this onomatopoeia evoking the vibrato effect of early musicians. In any case, at the beginning of the 20th century, the saxophone was played with a "straight" sound, like the clarinet, until Marcel Mule imposed vibrato in his classical interpretation, integrated it into the concert, and then taught it to his many disciples. He was really concerned about the vibrating sound. Let's remember that, being also violinists, Marcel Mule and his successor Daniel Deffayet were in the right position to take a model from stringed instruments (sonority and vibrato).

The obsession with vibrato gripped the French school for decades. Vibrato is exactly the same as slapping or playing in the highest register. Marcel Mule insisted on the mechanical or even metronomic practice of vibration and the control of its amplitude. Today there is more talk about its use in the musical context and about different techniques: pitch vibrato achieved by a jaw movement, intensity vibrato by blowing, as well as a combination of the two. There is also a vibrato with the movement of the tongue near the lip and another produced in the throat, quite difficult to explain (Bartolozzi 1967).

It's a real concern for students, sometimes even professionals, who are looking for the right vibrato and the right expression. In other parts, saxophonists ask themselves fewer questions, which makes it easier to practice the interpretation, but does not offer many alternatives in terms of musical choices.

The vibrato is certainly beautiful, but very often it is also systematic. The other orchestra musicians criticized the "French saxophonist" for a long time: "he vibrates like a saxophonist" or "the vibrato didn't bother me, it's just a saxophone".

The "French" sound characterizes warmth and homogeneity, introduced in interpretation by Marcel Mule. For a long time, there was talk of a "French-style" monotimbral sound, neat, round and clear at the same time, particularly well adapted to playing in an orchestra. The Paris National Conservatory with Marcel Mule, Daniel Deffayet and their students will be the bearer of this sound technique: "the french touch". We can recognize the French sound when listening to a CD because it is related to a balanced interpretation. The recording itself is quite matte, with great definition (Londeix 1989).

3. Lamento et Rondo – Pierre Sancan

With a strong emotional impact, characterized by a tension of substance due to the tonal ambiguity suggested by the evolved chromaticism, the work is the result of an advanced compositional thinking, which subjects the melody to a modulating variational work through thematic development procedures typical of the 20th century.

(I) Lamento

The formal structure of this articulation is based on the motivic frequency and the possibilities of expression of the instrumentalist, intensity being a determining element in the construction of an atmosphere. Just as I could consider this articulation as a variational articulation on the structure A A1 A2 due to the permanent motivic variation, so it could also be regarded as a tri-strophic form A B A, where B represents a thematic development in itself, with motivic aspects directed to both performing instruments.

The reference motive (α) of this part is characterized by predominantly scalar melodicality, with an intervallic, divisionally rhythmic, intervallic flip, on rubato (Ex. no. 1)

As can be seen, the first exposition of the motive contains a chromatic element of language - the inverted chromatic formula (in m. 3), leading to a duality of melody (C sharp – C natural).

The image shows a musical score for Pierre Sancan's "Lamento et Rondo", measures 1-7. The score is in 2/4 time and features three staves. The top staff has a melodic line with a chromatic descent and an inverted chromatic formula. The middle and bottom staves provide accompaniment with cluster-like structures and chromatic walks. Dynamics include *p*, *pp*, and *pp calme*. The tempo is marked "Adagio espressivo".

Fig. 1. Pierre Sancan, "Lamento et Rondo", m. 1-7

The accompaniment of this first exposure contains cluster-like intervallic structures, processed, in an ascending direction, by superimposed chromatic walks (see example above).

The first motivic variation is produced by the process of sequencing to the upper minor third, but also by transforming the inverted chromatic formula into an ascending chromatic path with resolution at the initial interval inverted to the upper octave.

Fig. 2. Pierre Sancan, "Lamento et Rondo", m. 8-11

The following representations of the basic motif are compressed in size, but the melodic substance is the same, the accompaniment being based on the same ascending parallel chromatic trails.

Fig. 3. Pierre Sancan, "Lamento et Rondo", m. 12-15

From an interpretative point of view, the musical discourse must be presented in a flowing, fluent, low-intensity, fluent manner, with nuances being predominantly in the piano. This is fully supported by the legato formula, present very often in this introduction, on very large time units, which demands stamina and sustaining ability. More attention needs to be paid to the attacks at the beginning of the phrases, which require articulation and fingerings where possible. In this way, the performer will exude greater assurance and clarity, especially in the lower register (m. 2, 7, 22).

The A2 articulation unfolds under the melodic poignancy of the initial motif, with its sequencing, centred this time on a Fa mode. Like the aforementioned procedures, the chromatic runs in parallelisms and their combinations are preserved in the pianistic execution, the soloistic discourse being dominated by a latent chromatic path on a descending line, with cadencing on the key of the mode – C sharp.

The image shows a musical score for Pierre Sancan's "Lamento et Rondo", measures 46-56. The score is written for saxophone and piano. It features a vocal line with lyrics "di - mi - nu - en - do e" and piano accompaniment. Performance markings include "poco a poco", "calmato", "pp", and "perdendosi". The score is written in a complex, chromatic style with multiple rhythmic enrichment procedures.

Fig. 4. Pierre Sancan, "Lamento et Rondo", m. 46-56

The composer's notated predictions in support of the interpretative act are quite numerous, if we bear in mind that this first part is only a page and a half long (Adagio espressivo, poco a poco crescendo, agitato et accelerando, sempre rubato, molto espressivi ed appassionato, poco a poco diminuendo e calmo, perdendosi).

(II) Rondo

The second Rondo articulation is a true page of technical and interpretative virtuosity, requiring from the instrumentalists of the chamber ensemble skills and possibilities of execution of great refinement, the melodic weave being intensely chromatic, and the tone-modal harmony of an impressionistic finesse; the multiple rhythmic enrichment procedures, the predominantly short note values, the indicated temp vif, the alternating metric system 5/8 - 6/8 - 9/8, the staccato technique and the widened melodic registers on both instruments, are elements that outline a work with a modern, original language, which makes the most of the instrumentalist's technique, the possibilities of the instrument, but, last but not least, the spectacular impact on the audience.

Of all these 20th -century particularities, I believe that the element with the most striking deviation from the classical area is the form of the work, mentioned

by its very title - Rondo. Thus, the structure A B A A C A A B B A represents the graphic scheme on the basis of which the entire musical process will unfold.

The basic element of the principle of strophicity, the refrain (A) contains two particularities that are permanently found in its four expositions: the piano introduction and the main soloistic motive, later taken over by the piano.

The piano introduction is melodically dominated by parallel chordal superimpositions, rhythmically complementary with the pedal on the B-flat sound, the rhythmicization being also suggested by the composer's indication *comme une danse*.



Fig. 5. Pierre Sancan, "Lamento et Rondo", m. 1-4

At the same time, the main melodic motif is centred on B-flat mode that benefits from a major-minor bipolarity, with a melodic line arranged in a scalar pattern, ending with an ascending segment on staccato technique.



Fig. 6. Pierre Sancan, "Lamento et Rondo", m. 7-11

The elaboration of this motive is realized on several levels: on the soloistic level it will undergo an ornamental variation through the upper embroidery, but also through the inversion of the melodic sense, while the pianistic unfolding contains a chromatic route realized bidirectionally descending latent (right hand), followed by a sequencing.

Fig. 7. Pierre Sancan, "Lamento et Rondo", m. 11-18

In order to emphasize the dancing character suggested by the composer, the performer has two distinct procedures at hand. The first is represented by short articulations with a uniform and exact character, and the second by accents that seem to break the rhythmic balance, thus giving a particular colour to the melody (m. 17-18).

For the correct and clear execution of the rhythmic formulas in measures 16 and 17, the saxophonist will use the position D C₂/ re C₂ and B \flat TA/ sib TA, this will beneficially influence the flowing and dance-like character.

The motivic reprise on the accompanying instrument no longer contains the previously processed variations, but only an inflection that links to the B couplet.

By means of a retransition in the form of an ascending chromatic latent chromatic path, arranged to the soloist, with a visible virtuosity character (e.g. below), the chorus A naturally emerges, identical to the previous one with a transitional ending towards what follows: the couplet C.

The image shows a musical score for Pierre Sancan's "Lamento et Rondo", measures 49-54. The score is written for saxophone and piano. The saxophone part features a complex melodic line with many accidentals and a long, sweeping phrase. The piano accompaniment consists of chords and arpeggiated figures. Dynamics include "poco" and "cres cen do".

Fig. 8. Pierre Sancan, "Lamento et Rondo", m. 49-54

The most difficult moment from the fingering point of view, which poses problems even for the most experienced saxophonists, is the one in bars 107 - 112. The only way to get through it is to approach it in the reading and further study stage in a decomposed way, grouped in twos on each interval, from the rare tempo to the one called for in the score.

The thematic reprise followed by the B couplet are static, with no deviations from previous representations, which gives the form unity.

The soloistic cadence is enhanced by ornamental embroidery, arpeggiated and scalar structures, crowned by a coda based on the trill effect in the soloist, in superimpositions of parallel octaves on descending scalar steps in the piano accompaniment.

Fig. 9. Pierre Sancan, „Lamento et Rondo”, m. 190-199

The ambitus used by the composer is very large, ranging from low B-flat to F-sharp in overlat, with an impressive rhythmic variety, based on combinations of fourths, eighths and sixteenths. There is also a wide range of articulations, from détaché (wide-long) to staccato, some with accent indications.

By strictly observing these, as well as the nuances, which have a very broad spectrum, the performer will succeed in emphasizing the interpretative style, based on the 'comme une danse' character imposed by the composer right from the start.

4. Conclusions

The ideal of the current French school is still defined by full, rich sonority, homogeneous in all registers and all nuances, balanced in détaché or legato interpretation.

With a reduced amplitude in decibels, this fine sound is lost in the orchestral mass of a concert performance. Let's evoke, for example, the failures of the French finalists, disqualified because of their sound at the competition in Dinant.

Others, like Daniel Kientzy, propose a new approach to the sound, because the perfect mastery of phrasing, intervals and vibrato are no longer enough to provide a beautiful version of works like Berio's *Sequenza* or Lauba's *Studies* (Prost 2008).

This sonority, historically related to the timbre of the Selmer Mark VI saxophone, requires a fairly closed mouthpiece with a medium chamber, as well as the use of strong reeds. The current conception of sound, which suits only a part of the current French interpreters, almost no longer finds repertoire at the height of its hopes and quality. Thus, the "glorious" French saxophone school is sometimes illustrated by a rather neat interpretation, a trend that is also felt in Asia, where beautiful sound is constantly associated with musicality.

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