THE OX IN THE CONCERT HALL:
JAZZ IDENTITY AND LA CRÉATION DU MONDE

Julio Moreno Gonzalez-Appling

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

December 2007

Committee:

Robert Fallon, Advisor
David Harnish
Katherine Brucher
ABSTRACT

Dr. Robert Fallon, Advisor

Darius Milhaud heard jazz for the first time in a London dance hall in 1919, and resolved to incorporate jazz into a chamber work. In America during the late 1910s, jazz was not yet a recognized genre, but rather was still a composite of several contributing styles. In Europe, however, ragtime, the blues, and American dance band music had fascinated modernist composers since the turn of the century. During his 1922 trip to the United States, Milhaud took every opportunity available to him to hear as much jazz as possible and found an outlet for his studies in the ballet La Création du monde, which premiered in Paris in 1923. The ballet opened to mixed reviews and French critics had little to say of Milhaud’s score. Ten years later, La Création received its American premiere and was hailed by American modernists as a precursor to the jazz works of Aaron Copland and superior to George Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue (1924).

Milhaud’s La Création du monde has often been categorized as one of many modernist forays into jazz. Milhaud employed a distinctly different approach to jazz, however, than his contemporaries. He sought not only to imitate jazz gestures, but to understand jazz culturally. This thesis examines how Darius Milhaud’s respect for folk music and personal commitment to culture led to La Création du monde, a work demonstrating a more comprehensive grasp of the jazz idiom than any of his European contemporaries.
This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, Fred Appling.

“If it were easy, everyone would do it.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first and foremost like to thank my mother, Carles Appling. Your love and support means the world to me and I cannot possibly thank you enough.

To Dr. Robert Fallon, I extend my most sincere thanks for guiding me through this entire process, cracking the whip when necessary, having more patience with me than I felt like I deserved, and providing encouragement when I needed it most. I also extend my deepest gratitude to my readers Dr. Kate Brucher and Dr. David Harnish for your help and support as well as for lending me your valuable time. To Dr. Carol Hess: Thank you for setting me off in the right direction and helping me establish the foundation of knowledge upon which I built my thesis.

A special thanks to Kizzy Stepanich who, despite being three time zones away, has been a constant source of support for me through the highs and lows of this and many other adventures in the last two years. I love you, and I thank you.

Finally, I’d like to thank God for giving me strength I never knew I had to do things I never thought I could ever do.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. JAZZ IDENTITY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins and Definitions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernism and the Folk Phenomenon</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Adoption and Appropriation of Jazz</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style, Culture, and Jazz</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. DARIUS MILHAUD, FOLK MUSIC, AND JAZZ</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milhaud and Identity</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milhaud in Brazil</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble on the Home Front</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milhaud in the United States</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milhaud and the Exotic</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genesis</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Constitution of <em>La Création</em></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French and American Reception</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

During the early twentieth century, modernist composers questioned many traditional musical values. What is the role of the audience? How should we listen to music? What should we listen for? What defines “good” music? Some artists, such as Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, looked forward, exploring new approaches to handling tonality and keeping at the forefront of the musical avant-garde. Others, such as Stravinsky, hearkened back to established models, finding the road to the future rooted in ties to the past. A third option for composers such as Bartók came in the form of the present, exploring the seemingly limitless resources of folk and popular musics.

Few composers limited themselves to one approach, and some, such as Darius Milhaud, exemplified all three. Milhaud was a member of the new generation of French postwar composers experimenting with the avant-garde, yet at the same time utilizing many of the established historical forms and asserting his ties to the French musical tradition. One of the more prolific composers of his generation, Darius Milhaud composed works in every major genre of his time, and following the outbreak of World War II in 1940, moved to the United States where he taught composition at Mills College in Oakland, California. Maurice Ravel identified Milhaud as “probably the most important of our youngest French composers.”¹ Yet today, Milhaud is known for only a handful of works and his name appears predominantly in the context of his French postwar contemporaries, Les Six.

Immediately evident in his writings—particularly his autobiography—is the importance Milhaud placed on identity and tradition. He begins his autobiography with the statement “I am a Frenchman by province and Jewish by religion.”  

Milhaud asserts strong ties to his provincial homeland of Aix, and to his Jewish heritage through a comprehensive knowledge of his family’s history dating back to the 15th century and the history of the Jews in the region dating back to before the birth of Christ. Milhaud also stresses the importance of identity and tradition through his music. In identifying himself within the musical lineage of Southern France, Milhaud articulates his ties to his provincial musical heritage. Milhaud also affirms his Jewish identity through numerous settings of Jewish songs as well as his incorporation of Jewish folk material into his compositions.  

While his surrealist ballet *The Ox on the Roof* (*Le Boeuf sur le toit*) (1919) incorporated the sounds of Brazilian popular music, *La Création du monde* guided a more northerly ox, American jazz, onto the ballet stage and eventually into the concert hall. Darius Milhaud made his first acquaintance with jazz in 1920, attending a London performance of Billy Arnold’s Novelty Band. He was immediately fascinated with the new musical form and while visiting the United States in 1922, attended performances of the jazz orchestras of Paul Whiteman and Leo Reisman. He followed the music to Harlem, and in his autobiography he imagines an authentic connection to Africa that he envisions as originating “in the darkest corners of the Negro soul” and reflecting “the vestigial traces of Africa no doubt.”  

---

view of jazz typical of the French artistic circle in the 1920s, I suggest that this was not intended as a stereotype, but an extension of Milhaud’s connection between musical product and provincial homeland. Inspired by his experiences and seeking to use the language of jazz in a composition, Milhaud composed the music for the ballet La Création du monde, an avant-garde ballet conceived by novelist and poet Blaise Cendrars, painter Fernand Léger, and dancer/choreographer Jean Börlin that depicted an African creation myth.

The interest in African folklore reflects the powerful influence of African culture on Parisian art in the early decades of the twentieth century, or what Bernard Gendron identifies as “Negrophilia.”5 Parisian artists, most notably Pablo Picasso, were influenced not necessarily by the style of art itself, but by its “force and directness of expression.”6 Bernard Gendron traces the parallels that the young Jean Cocteau drew between a 1902 performance of an American minstrel show, “Mr. and Mrs. Elks,” and the values of modernism:

There is no allusion to the primordial, the exotic, the magical, to lazy rhythms, smooth undulations, childlike innocence, or natural frenzies. What [Cocteau] accentuates are sharp angularities, flinty protrusions, broken rhythms, irregular pulsations, dismemberment, discontinuities, gaudiness, mechanical violence and modernity.7 Rather than being fascinated by the exotic, fin-de-siècle French artists seemed to admire the modes of expression that characterized the presentation of the play. Each artistic collaborator on the ballet La Création du monde brought his own interpretation of African culture to his approach, led more by imagination than fidelity to the culture. As a

---

7 Gendron, Montmartre, 104.

This thesis examines how Darius Milhaud, a French modernist, adopted the jazz idiom into *La Création du monde* while relying on both representative jazz bands (and recordings) as well as an imagined cultural connection to Africa that he imposed on this music. Additionally, I will examine the reception history of *La Création*. The work received a rather cold critical reception in France largely due to the controversy raised by Milhaud’s association with *Les Six*. While the group identity had contributed to the initial fame of the individual young postwar French composers, their questionable anti-Debussian aesthetic, defined by poet and critic Jean Cocteau, placed them at odds with a French public that sought to re-assert ties with a solid French musical tradition. In contrast, the work’s critical success in America placed it within the context of the emerging popularity of jazz appropriation by modernist composers such as Aaron Copland and George Gershwin.

I propose that what distinguishes *La Création du monde* from other jazz works of the period is a matter of cultural empathy rather than cultural authenticity. Authenticity questions the quality of the product as it relates to its cultural origin. Rather, I am addressing the quality of the process and the attitude taken by the composer in adopting folk material. The question of process addresses the attitude of the composer addressing the borrowed material, what is being borrowed, and the degree that the composer integrates the borrowing with the composer’s personal compositional language. The idea of authenticity may be an important consideration, particularly in reference to the attitude

---

taken by the composer toward the material and culture, yet authenticity will not be addressed independently.

Chapter 1 summarizes issues related to appropriation and modernism with examples by early twentieth-century modernists such as Bartók, Stravinsky, Debussy, and Ravel. This chapter also examines the approach taken by Bartók and Milhaud to the study of folk music, and how this differed from their modernist contemporaries. An understanding of this distinction sheds light on the manner that Milhaud chose to approach the creation of *La Création*.

Chapter 2 addresses Milhaud’s perceptions of identity through an examination of his approach to the use of Brazilian popular music and jazz. Additionally, this chapter addresses the distinction made by Bernard Gendron between the *bricoleur*, or “tinkerer,” and the *flâneur*, or “slummer.” This distinction helps to clarify the claim to authenticity made by Milhaud in approaching the jazz idiom.

Chapter 3 discusses the ballet *La Création du monde*. I will examine Milhaud’s use of source material, including Billy Arnold’s Novelty Band, Leo Reisman’s orchestra, and records released on the Black Swan label. Last, I will compare and contrast the reception of the work in Paris to its reception in America within the context of other American jazz-modernist works of the period, in order to re-evaluate the position of *La Création du monde* within the canon of western classical music.
CHAPTER I
JAZZ IDENTITY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the early twentieth century, European art music composers looked forward, exploring new approaches to music, and also looked outward, adopting the unfamiliar sounds of non-European cultures. At the same time in America, jazz emerged, incorporating elements of ragtime, the blues, dance music, band music, and the western classical tradition. Fascinated with this new musical form, some European modernist composers sought to appropriate jazz, incorporating stylistic elements while neglecting to understand or appreciate the culture behind the music. Critics often identified jazz simply by its elements and its effects. Syncopation, improvisation, a wide timbral palette, and a characteristic harmonic language encompassed aspects of jazz, but these elements alone mean little without an understanding of the cultural and musical context. This chapter will examine the origins and constituent elements of jazz in the 1910s in order to clarify the subsequent discussion of early attempts by art music composers to incorporate these elements into their works.

Origins and Definitions

The initial difficulty faced by art music composers who appropriated jazz stems from the variety of definitions of jazz. Depending on one’s frame of reference, the term “jazz,” in the 1920s, indicated an emotional experience, cacophonous noise, a genre of music, and even a colorful expletive. Taking each of these into account, Andrew Clark, editor of Riffs and Choruses: A New Jazz Anthology, observes that it is much simpler to
describe the experience of jazz than to define the nature of jazz. Even then, his definition is more a list of features than an explanation:

The working context of jazz activity is an informal, performance one, with ritual inter-action between musicians and audience; it is primarily improvised, a music of spontaneous, sometimes collective creativity; its ‘swing’ and rhythmic emphases – syncopation – are a marked feature of its momentum; it has distinct timbral qualities in instrumentation, voice and style; and it is a complex blending of European, African and African-American musical traditions – in (respectively?) harmony, rhythm, and melodic form.9

The various degrees to which strands of jazz adhere to or depart from these characteristics compound the difficulty of a simple definition. Particularly in the early twentieth century, jazz lacked a standardized model and found its origins in various genres and cultures. Its appropriation therefore involved sorting through an array of styles and traditions. The forerunners of jazz such as ragtime, the cakewalk, the blues, and Dixie bands present many of the same ambiguous and unverifiable origins and a similar lack of a model from which to depart. Though definitions of these elements may not be simple, the most prominent contributors to early jazz can be isolated and examined individually. It is the combination of these contributing genres that produced the first jazz musicians and inspired the earliest art music forays into jazz.

The predominant origins of jazz lie in the folk music of late nineteenth century black Americans. In The New Grove Dictionary, Mark Tucker defines jazz, first and foremost, as “a musical tradition rooted in performing conventions that were introduced and developed early in the twentieth century by African Americans.”10 Most histories of jazz begin with the mixing of its contributing subgenres that began in New Orleans around 1917 with orchestrated, syncopated dance bands. The earliest musicians to be

---

identified with jazz, James Reese Europe and Jelly Roll Morton, treated jazz as a manner of approaching music, as inspired by aspects of the many genres that fed into it. Jazz style involved adopting the syncopation of ragtime, the timbral flexibility and dynamic range of the blues, the improvisation demonstrated by the New Orleans Dixie bands, and the tonal vocabulary and instrumentation of the classical tradition. Each of these styles contributed significantly to what would become identified as jazz.

The characteristic syncopation of early jazz can be attributed to the influence of ragtime. The term “ragtime” originated with the slang “ragged-time” indicating the heavy syncopation that characterized rags. In 1917, Walter Kingsley, in one of the earliest articles published on jazz, defined jazz not as a genre, but as an approach to existing music, saying that “to-day the jazz bands take popular tunes and rag them to death to make jazz.” While ragtime was originally inspired by the minstrel and vaudeville dance traditions, orchestrations of rags for big band gave rise to the first dance bands and eventually the New Orleans Dixie bands that incorporated collective improvisation and solo choruses. Ragtime eventually gave rise to stride, a more harmonically and technically intricate solo piano style that originated in Harlem and incorporated complex polyrhythms and cross rhythms. Stride pianists influenced later jazz pianists such as Duke Ellington, Art Tatum, and Thelonious Monk.

The blues, like ragtime, defies simple definition since it equally encompasses both a state of being as well as a musical subgenre. Originally a vocal genre practiced in the late nineteenth century by black field workers, the style relied heavily on call-and-

---

response form. Many blues musicians accompanied themselves on guitar, piano, or harmonica. While standard blues forms exist, the essence of the blues lies in the personal expression of emotion (typically angst or sorrow) through the medium of music.\(^\text{13}\) The cacophonous sounds characteristic of early recordings of jazz bands reflect the influence of the blues, where players would imitate blues vocalizations through the smearing and growling of tones to achieve an intentionally rough effect. The most characteristically “bluesy” of these gestures, the flattening of the seventh and, most commonly, third scale degrees, became a common harmonic signifier for the blues.

The primary contribution of the western classical tradition to jazz was instrumentation. By using the instruments of western classical music, jazz musicians adopted the tonal system of high art music. Early dance bands playing the popular syncopated rags and cakewalks gave rise to the New Orleans Dixie bands, often composed of both self-taught amateur musicians and musically literate New Orleans Creole musicians trained in the classical tradition (though relegated to lower status by the Jim Crow laws). Depending on their geographic location, some ensembles felt a stronger influence of the blues tradition while others imitated the Dixie and syncopated dance bands. James Reese Europe’s military band, comprised of highly trained musicians from a variety of backgrounds and locations, demonstrated the potential versatility and virtuosity of these ensembles. Due to the sheer volume of the brass sound, most early jazz bands abandoned the use of strings, opting for a mixed brass and wind band with double bass, guitar, piano, and percussion accompaniment.

While early jazz felt the influence of art music through instrumentation, early modernist composers such as Igor Stravinsky and Claude Debussy explored new harmonic, rhythmic, and timbral possibilities. Both incorporated these American styles, as well as other folk material, into their works. The appropriation of any folk material, however, is more than simply imitation. While elements of jazz may be imitated, to understand the appropriate use of these elements within a jazz context requires an understanding of the culture from which the music originates. The difficulty inherent in the adoption of the jazz idiom was re-separating these elements that had been fused to create the form.

**Modernism and the Folk Phenomenon**

The modernist interest in folk music contributed to the wider acceptance of jazz in the 1920s and ’30s. Looking outward, rather than forward or backward, provided early twentieth-century composers with an alternative to atonality and neo-Classicism. Carl Dahlhaus acknowledges that the emerging trend of “local color” provided an option for opera composers in the early twentieth century:

This fondness for local color, for the exotic, folkloristic, or archaic, enlarged the musical palette and kept stylistic devices from becoming stale, but without puzzling audiences by parting with tradition. . . Local color, however, which seemed “new” and yet was immediately accessible, offered a refuge to opera composers who felt unequal to the aesthetic problems imposed upon their genre by modernism.14

While Dahlhaus had spoken specifically of opera subjects, the evocation of the foreign or exotic provide an alternative for early twentieth-century modernist composers seeking to break from tradition. Asian, American, South American, and even provincial folk music

---

represent but a few of these options. Bela Bartók, one of the first composers to study and consistently integrate folk music into his works, provides an early model for the culturally grounded, rather than imitative, adoption of a folk culture. Jazz, however, represents not a single culture, but an amalgamation of various genres and styles. To successfully assimilate the jazz idiom required an understanding of the composite stylistic elements.

On the heels of modernism, a second wave of revolutionary spirit rolled in from North America and headed east. The sounds of American jazz captivated French audiences from the very first performances of James Reese Europe’s Hellfighters in the late 1910s and was reviewed in French musical journals as early as 1922. As the first prominent musical phenomenon to arise from the United States, jazz so resonated with the times that author F. Scott Fitzgerald would characterize the 1920s as the “jazz age.” Composers including Igor Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and a young group of French postwar composers known as Les Six attempted to incorporate jazz into their compositions, each in his or her own manner. Not only were these prominent figures affected by jazz, but their influence spread back westward, influencing jazz musicians and composers with the timbral and harmonic complexity of high art music.

In his 1931 essay The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music, Béla Bartók articulates that folk melody represented the alternative solution to the “excesses of the Romanticists” at the end of the nineteenth century. However, as opposed to the simple quotation of folk melody or the use of variations on folk themes, Bartók asserts that if a

---

composer wishes to do more than simply imitate peasant music, one must study rigorously until it becomes part of one’s own compositional voice:

What is the best way for a composer to reap the full benefits of his studies in peasant music? It is to assimilate the idiom of peasant music so completely that he is able to forget all about it and use it as his musical mother tongue. . . It is the character of peasant music, indescribable in words, that must find its way into our music. It must be pervaded by the very atmosphere of peasant culture. Peasant motives (or imitations of such motives) will only lend our music some new ornaments; nothing more.17

Bartók accepted that to use the sonic resources of folk music required more than simply hearing and reproducing. He also acknowledged that in order to maintain and comprehend the culture one must live among the peasants as well, indicating that “it is not enough to study it as it was stored up in museums.”18 For Bartók, the key element of understanding folk music was understanding the motivation behind the melodies.

One can debate the degree that Bartók “succeeded” in adopting the language of Hungarian or Romanian folk culture. The key discovery for Bartók lies not in the product, but in the process. Here, Bartók has drawn a distinction between adopting the music (the ornaments, melodies, etc.) and adopting the cultural language of a people. By seeking to live among the people, Bartók promotes the idea that the musical product is inextricably linked to the culture that begat it. Although Bartók distinguishes between the adoption of style and the adoption of culture, it is by no means a clear distinction.

Bruno Nettl identifies style in music as “the aggregate of characteristics which a composition has.”19 Victor Belaiev presents style in relative terms, identifying it as “the

extent to which the elements are present in an artistic composition.”\textsuperscript{20} In both cases, style involves the identification of constituent elements of a composition, elements that appropriators would seek to emulate and reproduce. For a practitioner of folk music, these stylistic elements are rarely separate from their cultural tradition. But few composers sought to understand the music from a cultural perspective, with most examining the product first and seeking to emulate the effects. Bartók advocates study from the perspective of the individual within the culture, thus placing the musical product in a broader context. To make such an effort, however, requires not only an investment in the music, but the culture as well. Few modernists express such an interest, and the resulting musical products reflected this.

**The Adoption and Appropriation of Jazz**

Darius Milhaud was far from the first European composer to discover jazz. Debussy, Stravinsky, and Ravel had all adopted jazz (or a precursor of jazz) before the premiere of Milhaud’s *La Création du monde* in 1923. By 1923, the opportunities to hear American jazz in Europe were increasing through the wide distribution of jazz and blues recordings and the migration of African American jazz musicians to Europe, but were still limited to only the most popular recording artists. Each composer, however, employed a different means appropriating jazz, as evidenced both by their attitude toward it and the stylistic elements they incorporated into their music. Although each expressed a curiosity and openness for jazz, they borrowed only isolated traits of jazz, rather than fusing them into an integrated idiom. With the exception of Bartók and Milhaud, few composers, I argue, sought to assimilate a folk style on such a deep level.

While often cited as a classical composer influenced by jazz, Debussy was more influenced by ragtime, a forerunner of jazz, which he encountered through the music of John Phillip Sousa during the 1900 Paris Exposition. In a review of Sousa’s performance, Debussy expressed his admiration for the new American popular music, particularly a slower variation of orchestrated ragtime known as the cake-walk, saying, “If American music is unique for its invention of the famous ‘cake-walk,’ and I must admit that for the moment that seems to be its single advantage over all other kinds of music, then Mr. Sousa is unquestionably its king.” American popular music inspired his music before jazz became a standardized term.

Debussy used jazz for the purpose of characterization, as his use of jazz was limited to character pieces in programs. His best known use of jazz is “Golliwog’s Cakewalk,” from *Children’s Corner* (1908). He later incorporated similar rag-like elements into his piano preludes “Minstrels” (1910) and “General Lavine—eccentric” (1913). Mervyn Cooke asserts that, for Debussy, the fresh syncopated sound of ragtime “appealed to Debussy’s growing sense of anti-romanticism.” Debussy simultaneously explored the music of Russian gypsy music, Javanese gamelan, and Spanish and Indian folk music. He did not pursue a deep understanding of jazz; his approach imitates rather than adopts. He did not study piano rags, but imitated the syncopated style of the cakewalk for the purpose of characterization. Debussy appreciated the expressive qualities of jazz, but did not pursue a serious study of the roots or context of jazz.

Like Debussy, Stravinsky was drawn to the aesthetics of jazz. His appropriation of jazz succeeds insofar as it subsumes the stylistic aspects of jazz into his own voice.

---

22 Debussy, *Debussy on Music*, 181.
Where Debussy imitated jazz, Stravinsky absorbed it to such a great extent that much jazz influence in his work is nearly unrecognizable. Glenn Watkins notes that “once the sounds of jazz...were wedded to Stravinsky’s rhythmic manner previously announced under the Russian Primitivist banner, there was an increasing desire to interpret the results as a kind of art nègre.”23 In response to a 1954 concert of Stravinsky’s “jazz works,” music critic Lawrence Morton observed that “none of it is really jazz” and that Stravinsky’s music uses jazz elements for works that are “as authentically Stravinskian in shape and substance as any of the major masterpieces.”24 Stravinsky did not produce jazz compositions, but rather jazz-inspired Stravinsky. Histoire du soldat (1918), for example, while heavily syncopated and scored to resemble an early Dixie band, only vaguely resembles jazz. Stravinsky himself admits “my knowledge of jazz was derived exclusively from copies of sheet music, and as I never actually heard any of the music performed, I borrowed its rhythmic style not as played, but as written.”25 Similarly, Stravinsky’s Ragtime (1918) merely imitates the gestures and rhythms of ragtime, yet differs from American ragtime music harmonically and structurally. Neither Stravinsky’s biography nor his jazz works show a culturally-based understanding of jazz.

An ardent admirer of jazz, Maurice Ravel composed his Sonata for Piano and Violin (1923-27) during the same period as Milhaud’s La Création du monde, yet his work did not premiere until four years later. The second movement, entitled Blues: Moderato, incorporates stylistic elements of the blues, including slides and blue notes.

that imitate either the vocal stylings of a blues singer or a saxophone. As Debussy had done with the rag-inspired *Golliwog*, Ravel draws upon the blues, a subgenre of jazz, and uses the gestures to produce an effect, but not necessarily a synthesis. In an article entitled “Take Jazz Seriously!” Ravel admits to producing merely “stylized jazz, more French than American,” and chides the American public for not respecting jazz as an art from.\(^{26}\)

Perhaps the most glaring difficulty encountered by appropriators of jazz was that few had ever heard enough jazz to represent the large body of influences that jazz contained. This often led to superficial imitations of single contributing subgenres (*Golliwogg’s Cakewalk, Ragtime*), a patchwork of similarities that did little to replicate the actual sound (*Histoire du soldat*), or a selection of motives and figures imitating the style, yet devoid of context (*Sonata for Violin and Piano*). Again, these pieces represent the work of composers who admired or respected jazz and sought to imitate it. To make jazz one’s own and “speak the language,” as Bartók put it, would require not only the desire to do so, but also a multi-faceted understanding of jazz. This was a difficult task, since jazz in the 1910s was not recognized as a genre and lacked pedagogical method. Such an understanding would require knowledge of the contributing elements of jazz from the ground up, so to speak. The earliest jazz musicians not only had this understanding, but they lived it.

**Style, Culture, and Jazz**

In its earliest incarnations, jazz existed as an amalgamation of various styles, including the western classical tradition, blues, ragtime, and African American folk

spirituals. Two early jazz pioneers, Jelly Roll Morton and James Reese Europe, were products of each of these traditions. They provided a model for both the stylistic and cultural understanding of jazz, as they not only felt the influence of the contributing genres to jazz, but their training in western art music also provided the means for them to articulate their stylistic approach to the music.

Jelly Roll Morton, the self-proclaimed “inventor of jazz,” explained the different cultural elements that contributed to the style of jazz in his 1938 interviews with Alan Lomax.27 While Morton may not have invented jazz, he embodied everything that jazz could have encompassed at the time. In his interview, Morton isolates the style elements that he identified as essential to “jazz,” a term that Morton claims he coined in 1902 to distinguish jazz from ragtime. He attributes much of the origin of jazz to the cultural diversity of New Orleans at the turn of the century:

New Orleans was the stomping grounds for all the greatest pianists in the country…The sporting houses needed professors, and we had so many different styles that whenever you came to New Orleans, it wouldn’t make a difference that you just came from Paris or any part of England, Europe, or any place—whatever your tunes were over there, we played them in New Orleans.28

Morton then acknowledged that people played “ragtime in a hot style,” but said “ragtime is a certain type of syncopation and only certain tunes can be played in that idea.” He then separated the concept of jazz, saying that “jazz is a style that can be applied to any type of tune.” He then identifies syncopation, riffs, vibrato, and other timbral effects, as staples which separate ragtime from jazz.29

A similar isolation of the style element of jazz can be seen in publications during early 1920s addressing the issue of “jazzing up” existing compositions. In a 1922 article entitled “Drawing a Line for Jazz,” New York Times music critic Richard Aldrich expressed his concern for the sanctity of existing masterpieces of music:

Jazz draws the line nowhere. Nothing is safe from its devastating touch. The jazz blacksmiths soon came to the end of their own stocks of ideas, such as they were, and then their only resort was to lay violent hands upon music that musicians have always approached with respect and even reverence. . . Composers who have taken their place in history are likely to have their tombs violated if some jazz artist thinks it worth while to do so.\(^30\)

Notably, Aldrich acknowledges that the fear of “jazzing” was neither limited to western art music composers nor to white composers. Aldrich mentions that “the National Association of Negro Musicians has put itself on record as being opposed to such a use of the sacred melodies of its race.”\(^31\)

James Reese Europe provides an example of an early jazz musician with western classical training. Europe, classically trained as a violinist, pianist, and composer, studied with Henry Burleigh, composer and champion of black folk music, and collaborated with white dancers Vernon and Irene Castle to produce a “respectable” version of dance hall jazz, the foxtrot.\(^32\) As a bandleader, Europe put together the 369\(^{th}\) US Infantry Regiment Band, which not only demonstrated its musical proficiency in the concert hall but its bravery on the battlefield during World War I. The 369\(^{th}\) presented a number of concerts throughout France, presenting one of the first opportunities for European audiences to hear live jazz.

\(^{32}\) Irene Castle, Castles in the Air (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), 92.
James Europe exemplified jazz as a learned mode of interpretation rather than a genre. While performing in France, the director of the Garde Républicain expressed difficulty achieving the “jazz effects” that Europe’s band had produced while reading the same music. Europe’s musicians, who were equally skilled at both improvisation and sight-reading, brought an interpretation to the music not conveyed through the notation. Europe articulates the difference between the manner that the French band played and the manner that his band performed:

The great band had played the composition superbly—but [the director of the Garde Républicain] was right: the jass effects were missing . . . He told me that his own musicians felt sure that my band had used special instruments. Indeed, some of them, afterward attending one of my rehearsals, did not believe what I said until after they had examined the instruments used by my men.33

In reference to these effects, Europe explains that “It is natural for us to do this; it is, indeed, a racial musical characteristic.” Europe would later express that he returned from France “more convinced than ever that negroes should write negro music.”34 These statements relating musical product to cultural origin resemble Milhaud’s similar sentiments regarding the Mediterranean lyricism inherent in his music.

Musicians such as James Reese Europe and Jelly Roll Morton, having been trained in the art music and folk music traditions, demonstrate a stylistic fluency with early jazz. While many modernist composers admired jazz, few penetrated beyond a superficial understanding of it. As demonstrated by Bartók, to adopt a tradition was to make the culture one’s own rather than simply incorporate isolated stylistic traits. For a composer to adopt jazz successfully required both an appreciation and openness to folk music as well as extensive and meticulous study of the various traditions that fed into the

34 Vernen, “That Mysterious ‘Jazz’,” 28
current stream of jazz, and at this time no other European composer was more fit to this task than Darius Milhaud.
Both Milhaud’s 1949 memoir *Notes Without Music* as well as his recently published 1952 interview with Claude Rostand begin with the same subject: his identity as both a Frenchman and a Jew. While not a particularly unusual way to begin a memoir, the commonality indicates the importance Milhaud ascribed to cultural identity. Milhaud’s strong sense of identity sheds light on his passionate interest in folk music, as he relates the lyricism of his works to his Mediterranean and Jewish culture. His interest in his own provincial folk music inspired many of his works during the late 1910s and early 1920s, as well as his interest in Brazilian popular music and American jazz. Despite frequent criticisms to the contrary, Milhaud held a deep interest in jazz. A genuine interest in folk music, as demonstrated by his commitment to cultural identity and meticulous study of Brazilian popular music, reinforces Milhaud’s interest in jazz and eventually the composition of the jazz-inspired *La Création du monde*.

**Milhaud and Identity**

While stressing the importance of one’s provincial culture, Milhaud remained aware of and open to stylistic influences. As Milhaud took in these external influences, he consistently sought to form the same cultural foundation for his adopted styles as he had for his own musical origins. He begins his memoir by examining his own musical lineage in the same manner that he later uses to contextualize American and Brazilian music.

---

In the first chapter of his memoir, entitled “Origins,” Milhaud provides a short but detailed history of how not only the Milhaud family, but the Jews as a whole, came to arrive in France. His paternal ancestors, he says, descended from the settlements of the Mediterranean Jews at Carpentras during the fifteenth century. Milhaud notes that his great-grandfather Joseph Milhaud was both a scholar of Jewish history, having conducted a “study of the Pentateuch and another on Deuteronomy and a life of Jethro,” and assisted with the census of Israelites returning to France following the revolution.\(^\text{37}\) His maternal ancestors, who descended from the Sephardic Jews in Italy, were actively involved in business with a grandfather who “owned the tobacco monopoly in Austria, a Bank at Marseilles, mines in Serbia and flour-mills at Salonica.”\(^\text{38}\) The second chapter of Milhaud’s biography details his childhood and his immediate family, as well as fond descriptive memories of the landscape and setting of his hometown Aix, that he recalls frequently. His early descriptions of Aix reveal his organic connections to the hustle and bustle of the city as well as his love for the surrounding countryside. From this “Mediterranean world” Milhaud claims to have derived his love of lyricism, that he believes gives music its essential emotive qualities.\(^\text{39}\)

In his interview with Milhaud, Rostand draws a connection between the lyricism of African American folk music (to be discussed later in this chapter) and Jewish folk music as a characteristic “shared by all oppressed people.”\(^\text{40}\) Milhaud clarifies the purpose of stressing his Jewish identity, saying “if I emphasize ‘Jewish religion’ it is because I am


deeply religious.” He notes that his Jewish ancestors settled in the region that became France centuries before the birth of Christ, immigrating largely for reasons of trade rather than oppression. Having received asylum from the Pope, his descendants had been protected from persecution. Milhaud had, in fact, drawn the parallel of oppression himself in his memoirs, but had actually referred to the persecution of the Jews in Egypt thousands of years prior to the African slave trade.

Milhaud’s ties to his French identity are both musical and provincial. He uses the label “Mediterranean” to encompass both his provincial Jewish and French traditions as one geographic group. Milhaud notes an even stronger connection to the French musical tradition, considering himself “the continuation of the line that leads from Couperin and Rameau through Berlioz, Bizet, and Chabrier.” While he accepts that circumstances may enhance one’s personal tradition, Milhaud asserts here that one’s cultural tradition consistently remains an overriding influence:

One does not invent a tradition; one receives it and works at it. It depends not only on the musician’s tastes and his inward motivation, on those influences which are the result of the circumstances and events of his life, nor on his particular musical preferences, but, above all, on the race to which he belongs.

He identified with the romanticism and craftsmanship of Berlioz, the proportion and restraint of Couperin and Rameau, and the utility, moderation, and simplicity of Bizet and Chabrier.

While Milhaud likely felt the influence of these composers, he also felt pressure from others. Barbara Kelly believes that Milhaud’s strong assertions of French musical lineage may, in part, be in defense against the allegations by d’Indy that Jews had

---

41 Rostand, Interviews, 19.
42 Rostand, Interviews, 16.
weakened the musical tradition of France.\footnote{Barbara Kelly, \textit{Tradition and Style in the Works of Darius Milhaud} (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2003), 28.} Vincent d’Indy, a Wagnerian and anti-Semitic, founded the Schola Cantorum to stress ties with the institutions of the past. D’Indy asserted this strong sense of tradition as a means of purging French tradition of the influence of such composers as Meyerbeer and Offenbach who, according to him, “were only interested in financial, rather than artistic gain” and who “slowed down the progress of art for a large part of the nineteenth century.”\footnote{Vincent D’Indy, “Une École de Musique répondant aux besoins modernes,” \textit{La Tribune de Saint-Gervais}, (November, 1990): 9. For more on d’Indy’s anti-Semitism, see Jane Fulcher, \textit{French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).}

Milhaud’s separation of identity and style is further demonstrated through his attitudes toward Wagner. While it would be easy for Milhaud to reject Wagner purely on the grounds of his anti-Semitism, his criticism of Wagner clearly separates political attitudes from his music. There is no denying Milhaud’s discomfort with the politics of Wagner, that he, in his later interview with Rostand, relates to those of Hitler.\footnote{Rostand, \textit{Interviews}, 44.} Milhaud also speaks strongly on his particular distaste for Wagner’s technique of \textit{leitmotif}, that he calls a:

\begin{quote}
\text{tourist guide that permits the listener to say, “Hey, look who’s here! It’s so-and-so!” Of course the public takes the bait. It’s so appealing to be able to follow along, to recognize the little landmarks, to have the illusion of being very smart.}\footnote{Rostand, \textit{Interviews}, 45.}
\end{quote}

Milhaud, however, admits that he tried to understand Wagner, even attending a production of \textit{Tristan} “at least twenty times during [his] youth.”\footnote{Rostand, \textit{Interviews}, 46.} He also claims that he
is “not so stupid as to be unaware of some of Wagner’s contributions, especially his technical skill,” noting his admiration for the finale of the second act of *Meistersinger*.49

Milhaud also clearly articulates that he does not relate his distaste for Wagner with distaste for the German lineage in general. He does not hesitate to admit that he admires the music of Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Hindemith. He also admires composers and music that derive from the aesthetic ideas of Wagner, namely the music of Mahler and Strauss. Milhaud even links his admiration of polytonality to Bach, whom he claims clearly employed polytonality in different voices of his fugues. Milhaud drew criticism in the press for his open admiration for Schoenberg and for his participation as conductor in the 1922 French premiere of *Pierrot Lunaire*. He even traveled to Vienna to perform *Pierrot* for Schoenberg personally and dedicate one of his more fiercely polytonal works, his fifth string quartet, to Schoenberg.50

Milhaud did not take the issue of adoptive tradition lightly. Claiming ties to a cultural tradition, such as religion, he says, involves not simply adapting the image of tradition, but a commitment to building a genuine connection with it. From this perspective, his interest in folk culture implies a deliberate, passionate searching, rather than the casual browsing that characterized other modernist forays into folk music. This commitment echoes Bartók’s method of cultural immersion and demonstrates his willingness to reach further than earlier modernists, whose adoption of folk melodies involved mainly quotation and imitation.

Milhaud’s first experiments with folklore involved his own Jewish heritage. He identifies *Poéme sur un cantique de Camargue* (1914) as his first composition in this

---

vein. In his interview with Rostand, he says that his passion for his provincial folk music inspired his interest in other folk music, whence he began to “mine the treasures of Jewish folklore, South American, Negro, and other North American cultures.” In reference to his use of folk materials, Milhaud tells Rostand:

> Obviously, I never take folk tunes and simply harmonize them, making only a few little variations with each repetition of the melody. To use popular themes in that way is simply to revive them. . . One should adapt the original material and make it compatible with one’s own style.

Milhaud stresses the importance of connecting the borrowed material with oneself, forging a personal connection with it rather than superficially quoting it. The material forms a synthesis with one’s own personal style, forming an original and new, yet still personal compositional style.

**Milhaud in Brazil**

Milhaud traveled frequently in his lifetime, and often expressed a fondness for travel. His first major trip abroad brought him to Brazil. While Milhaud often expressed a wide-eyed fascination with the exotic that was typical of artists of his generation, he also showed reverence in his approach to exploring the native cultures, meticulously studying manuscripts and recordings of music in order to understand the music culturally rather than simply emulating select gestures. Milhaud’s experience in Brazil provided him with the opportunity to both study the popular music of a culture not his own, and, in the process, fuse this style with his own emerging compositional voice which included his interest in polytonality.

---

In 1917, following the painful death of his close friend Léo Latil, Milhaud sought to escape the environment of France. Unfit to serve on the front, he accepted the invitation of poet Paul Claudel to accompany him to Brazil as his secretary in charge of propaganda, where he remained from January 1917 to 1918. Milhaud found immediate comfort in the tropical environment of Rio de Janeiro. He recalled taking frequent strolls through the city and absorbing the geography of the coastline and forests. Here he compares his impressions of the city with those of the forest that may have shaped his perception of Brazilian culture:

The contrast was equally striking between the inhabitants of the city and of the forest, for in Rio, on the very fringe of the forest, lived descendants of the Nordic races who had gradually reverted to savagery and now inhabited miserable huts, surrounded by a horde of half-naked children and having a wretched field of maize or one or two banana trees for sole possessions.  

He vividly recalls arriving in Rio in the midst of the Carnival and beholding the unusual sights there, including elaborate costumes and decoration. Of particular fascination to Milhaud was the music.

Milhaud fell in love with the rich culture of Brazil and desired to understand the rhythms of the music, specifically popular dance forms including the chôros, tango, and samba. He studied them voraciously until he felt comfortable enough to adopt them into his own compositional language. Milhaud recalls his efforts:

I was intrigued and fascinated by the rhythms of this popular music…so I bought a lot of maxixes and tangos and tried to play them with the syncopated rhythms that go from one hand to the other. At last, my efforts were rewarded and I could both play and analyze this typically Brazilian subtlety.

---

55 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 69.
57 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 70-71.
Milhaud’s method of understanding popular music was to study scores and then attempt to play the music until he felt comfortable enough to negotiate the style in a way he felt was natural. In Brazil, he had access to transcriptions and printed music, using these as primary source material for studying Brazilian music. With the exception of Le Boeuf sur le toit, that represents largely a collage of popular music material, Milhaud’s Brazilian-inspired works L’Homme et son désir (1918) and Saudades do Brazil (1920) demonstrate his commitment to adopting and understanding Brazilian music.58

While in Brazil, in addition to exploring Brazilian popular music Milhaud also rediscovered polytonality. Milhaud mentions that upon arriving in Brazil, he set to work on Les Eumémides (1917) as well as L’Enfant prodigue (1917). In his autobiography, Milhaud discusses the purpose of polytonality in L’Enfant:

What I wanted was to eliminate all nonessential links and to provide each instrument with an independent melodic line or tonality. In this case, polytonality is no longer a matter of chords, but of the encounter of lines. . . In composing this music, I had recaptured the sounds I had dreamed of as a child when I closed my eyes for sleep and seemed to hear music I thought I should never be able to express.59

Milhaud implies here that his use of polytonality was not a conscious effort on his part, but it rather reflected the sound he had long hoped to achieve. While it is questionable whether Milhaud actually dreamed polytonal music as a child, his statements imply that his extended tonal language did not represent a personal rebellion against the pre-established norm. This also explains Milhaud’s orchestration that focuses on the interaction between individual instruments, and “provide[s] each instrument with an

59 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 72.
independent melodic line or tonality." Milhaud applies polytonality by moving away from harmonically-driven compositions (i.e. impressionism) in favor of music that grew out of the interaction between melodies.

The fruits of Milhaud’s experience in Brazil were works demonstrating both the influence of Brazilian popular music as well as his re-discovered interest in polytonality. The ballet _L’Homme et son désir_, a joint work inspired by the poetry of Claudel, included a variety of percussion instruments imitating the ambient sounds of Brazil he heard after dark. Milhaud mentions that within _L’Homme_, he wished to preserve the “tonal and rhythmic independence” of the instruments. _Saudades do Brazil_ for solo piano demonstrates the culmination of Milhaud’s efforts to fuse his personal style with an adopted musical style. In _Saudades_, Milhaud successfully interweaves polytonality with the Brazilian-style rhythms without quotation of existing material. When Rostand questioned Milhaud on the procedure followed by Bartók and Falla in writing music that “preserved the indigenous spirit while using not actual themes, but intervals and rhythms typical of the original sources,” Milhaud responded that “_Saudades do Brazil_ does not contain a single quotation.” Not only had Milhaud studied the Brazilian rhythms carefully, he demonstrated the fruits of his research by producing an original work that employed Brazilian rhythms, subtle chromaticism, and bimodality. These interests that Milhaud cultivated in Brazil—popular music, exploration of polytonality, and emphasis on melodic, rather than harmonic, composition—aligned him with a revolutionary group of young composers in France known as _Les Six._

---

60 Milhaud, _My Happy Life_, 72.
61 Milhaud, _My Happy Life_, 72.
62 Milhaud, _Interviews_, 70
Trouble on the Home Front

In addition to being a group of artists, Les Six was also a group of friends who met weekly to share ideas and new compositions as well as attend concerts, films, and occasionally the Montmartre Fair. Through his association with the artists of Les Six, Milhaud was introduced to jazz for the first time and met some of his collaborators on La Création du monde, including painter Ferdinand Léger and writer Blaise Cendrars.

Les Six originally had been united through a series of concerts organized as tributes to Eric Satie and performed in 1917 and 1918. The composers George Auric, Louis Durey, and Arthur Honegger (who had suggested the addition of Milhaud) were initially linked together by critic Henry Collet in the 1920 article entitled “Un livre de Rimsky et un livre de Cocteau: les cinq Russes, les six Français et Erik Satie.” Milhaud insists the names were arbitrarily chosen “simply because they knew each other” and that he “fundamentally disapproved of joint declarations of aesthetic doctrines,” yet he admits that the formation of the group “helped draw the bonds of friendship closer among [them].” The six composers as well as other artists, writers, and performers met weekly at Milhaud’s home to exchange ideas and occasionally collaborate on joint projects, the most notable being Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel (1921) organized by Henry Cocteau.

While Milhaud had not been physically present during the initial formation of the group, his ideology fell in line with the manifesto of the group, Cocteau’s pamphlet Le Coq et l’arlequin. Cocteau called for a renewed sense of identity with post-World War I French composers, following the simple and anti-establishment aesthetic of Satie rather

than the impressionistic (and popular) example of Debussy. Another key concept to the unity of *Les Six* and the articulation of Milhaud’s musical voice lies in understanding the style of polytonality.  

Henri Collet, remembered primarily for naming *Les Six*, published articles in 1920 that would link the members of *Les Six* stylistically through their adoption of the polytonal idiom. In 1921, critic Paul Landormy adopted the “amalgam of polytonality, *Les Six*, and simplicity” as an argument against the “Russian-inspired impressionism” practiced by Debussy and his imitators.

The collective idea of *Les Six* seems to have taken on a life and voice of its own, even though it represents only a fragment of the individuals that made up the group. Milhaud’s association with the group both helped and hindered his reputation. During the postwar period, Debussy was a revered figure in French music. Barbara Kelly mentions that “Debussy’s death in 1918 firmly linked him in the public mind with the war and the fate of the French Nation.” Where the nation clung to figures such as Debussy (and to some extent, Ravel) to define a pure French musical tradition, the young generation of French composers opened their arms to stylistic traits of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. The 1922 premiere of Stravinsky’s *Mavra*, however, had split *Les Six*, with only Poulenc, Auric, and Milhaud (as well as Satie, Cocteau, and Collet) praising the work. Soon after, Poulenc and Auric abandoned Satie as their “spiritual leader.” With only Milhaud left, *Les Six* had, for all intents and purposes, become *Le Un*. Repeated attacks in the press, particularly by the critic Émile Vuillermoz, had disrupted the fragile and ambiguous unity between members of *Les Six*.

---

For Milhaud, an individual who felt he was a part of the lineage of French music, his association with a group that, to many, seemed to be a young group of French musical renegades hurt his reputation with the press and the musical public. Barbara Kelly acknowledges that Milhaud’s “ambivalent attitude” toward success contributed to his persistent connection with the image of *Les Six*, even following the group’s dissolution. Milhaud echoed this sentiment, with frequent assertions that he took pride in violent negative reactions from the public, saying that “enthusiasm or vehement protests prove that your work is alive.” What did concern Milhaud was indifference, and his Brazilian inspired *Le Boeuf sur le toit* (1919), a joint work with Jean Cocteau, earned popular success, but contributed to his being labeled a “comic composer.”

While in London for the premiere of *Le Boeuf*, Milhaud and Cocteau visited a Hammersmith dance hall where Milhaud first heard a jazz ensemble. This marked the beginning of Milhaud’s interest in jazz, an idiom that he had yet to encounter, and jazz engaged his interest over the next four years in the same manner that Brazilian popular music had during and following his stay in Brazil. The ensemble, led by British pianist Billy Arnold, consisted of six musicians, performing jazz in the vein of syncopated dance music. After seeing the band and hearing the music for the first time, Milhaud was astounded, saying:

> The new music was extremely subtle in its use of timbre: the saxophone breaking in, squeezing out the juice of dreams, or the trumpet, dramatic or languorous by turns, the clarinet, frequently played in its upper register, the lyrical use of the trombone, glancing with its slide over quarter-tones in crescendos of volume and pitch, thus intensifying the feeling; and the whole, so various yet not disparate, held together by the piano and subtly punctuated by the complex rhythms of the percussion, a kind of inner beat, the vital pulse of the rhythmic life of the music.

---

69 Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, 90.
71 Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, 98.
This initial experience with jazz introduced Milhaud to the rhythmic and timbral characteristics of jazz, the heavily syncopated rag style and timbral effects such as glissandi and growls that had been adopted by the dance bands at the time. These characteristics can be heard in Arnold’s 1920 London recording of *Left Alone Again Blues*, with its heavily syncopated melody, growls in the brass, and glissandi in the trombones, all over a rag-like piano accompaniment. Milhaud had the opportunity to see the Billy Arnold Band frequently in Paris’ Bar Gaya, where they were invited to perform by Milhaud’s longtime friend Jean Wiéner.

Milhaud had met Wiéner while studying under André Gédalge at the Paris Conservatoire. Wiéner invited Milhaud and Les Six to meet regularly at the Bar Gaya, that often featured performances of American popular music. Wiéner, a composer and professional concert and parlor pianist, published his own work entitled *Concerto franco-américain* (1924) that incorporated both his strong neo-Baroque influences and French parlor music. Milhaud recalls performances by Wiéner fondly:

> We loved to listen to his playing, and to that of his partner, Vance, the Negro, who was an admirable saxophonist and banjo-player. Without any transition these two would pass from fashionable ragtime and fox-trots to the most celebrated works of Bach.

Though it is unlikely that Wiéner’s music influenced *La Création du monde*, Wiéner played a large part in exposing Les Six to American popular music, which had appeared in France as early as the late 19th century in the form of American dance band music. He frequently performed George Gershwin, Vincent Youmans, and popular hits such as *Old

---

73 Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, 98.
Fashioned Love and St. Louis Blues. Milhaud’s first experiments with American popular music, the solo piano works Caramel Mou (1920) and Trois Rag-Caprices (1922), possibly show the influence of Wiéner. Caramel Mou, a “shimmy” dedicated to George Auric, employed the sounds of American rags. The three-movement Trois Rag-Caprices, dedicated to Wiéner, incorporated the American popular dance styles blended with Milhaud’s polytonal dissonances. Weekly concerts by Wiéner sustained Milhaud’s interest in jazz until, in 1922, a concert tour brought Milhaud to the United States where he arrived determined to learn all he could about jazz during his stay.

**Milhaud in the United States**

Unlike his experience in Brazil, where Milhaud had fallen for the atmosphere and sounds of the culture during his visit, Milhaud came to the United States resolute to penetrate the idiom of jazz. Rather than confining his study to a single strand of jazz—as Stravinsky and Debussy had with ragtime or Ravel had with the blues—Milhaud sought out a number of possible resources to further his understanding not just of jazz, but “Negro music” in general. While Milhaud’s understanding of the cultural origins of jazz may have been partially misguided or overly speculative, as will be discussed later in this chapter, his process of exploring and attempting to understand jazz in all of its incarnations was unique among European artists of his generation.

Milhaud arrived in January 1922 and returned, at the latest, by September of 1922, in time to attend the Festival of French Music with Roussel and Ravel. In those

---

76 Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, 112.
nine months, he had the opportunity to hear jazz in a variety of venues. According to Milhaud, the American press was shocked to hear of the European admiration for jazz:

When I arrived in New York, I had told the newspapermen interviewing me that European music was considerably influenced by American music. ‘But whose music?’ they asked me; ‘Macdowell’s or Carpenter’s?’ ‘Neither the one nor the other,’ I answered, ‘I mean jazz.’ They were filled with consternation, for at that time most American musicians had not realized the importance of jazz as an art form and relegated it to the dance hall.  

Milhaud approached jazz as a valid art form rather than a subculture or vulgar entertainment medium, and, as the above quotation suggests, he did not see a future for this in the American attitude toward jazz.

In New York, Milhaud had the opportunity to see both the Leo Reisman Jazz Orchestra and Paul Whiteman’s Orchestra. The Reisman orchestra played in the Hotel Brunswick, where he had been invited by Dr. Archibald T. Davidson, director of the Harvard Glee Club. Milhaud recalls:

[Reisman] got from his instrumentalists an extreme refinement of pianissimo tones, murmured notes, and glancing chords, whisperings from the muted brass, and barely formulated moans from the saxophone, which had a highly individual flavor. The regular rhythm was conveyed by the muffled beat of the percussion, and above it he spun the frail filigree of sound from the other instruments, to which the high notes of the violin lent an added poignancy.

Milhaud then compares this to the Paul Whiteman Orchestra that he describes as “a sort of Rolls Royce of dance music, but whose atmosphere remained entirely of this world.”  

He also commented on the refinement and musicality with which these bands approached jazz, noting that the “constant use of syncopation in the melody was of such contrapuntal

---

77 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 109.
78 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 109.
79 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 109.
freedom that it gave the impression of unregulated improvisation, whereas in actual fact it was elaborately rehearsed daily.”

While in New York, Milhaud briefly mentions being called upon by Harry Burleigh. Burleigh, an American composer known for his arrangements of African folk songs, had previously been acquainted with Antonin Dvořák, for whom he had instilled an appreciation for American folk material. Milhaud does not elaborate on his visit with Burleigh, only briefly noting that he “played me Negro folk tunes and hymns, which interested me keenly, for I wished to take advantage of my stay to find out all I could about Negro music.” Milhaud relates the spirituals to the popular blues songs like W.C. Handy’s *St. Louis Blues*, that express “the same tenderness, the same sadness as that which inspired the slaves.” Milhaud therefore sought a cultural connection between the sounds of the music and the culture of the people—as he had made for himself with his “Mediterranean lyricism.” These connections may, however, have been influenced or reinforced by his meeting with Burleigh.

Milhaud’s wife Madeline recalls that he listened to the “dozens of records” he had brought from the United States “night and day” in preparation for incorporating jazz into his work. These recordings included “I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate” and “The Wicked Five Blues,” two instrumental recordings on the Black Swan record label. Most early recordings to come out of Black Swan Records, the first record label to be operated exclusively by African Americans, featured the work of both Fletcher Henderson and William Grant Still as managers and musicians, and, according to

---

80 Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, 98.
Henderson, consisted largely of “straight songs or novelty numbers in the raggy style which was that heritage of the Europe-Brymn-Dabney School . . . the one blues had not been done in blues style.” The label would have likely folded without Ethel Waters, the most successful artist on the Black Swan Record label, whose songs “Down Home Blues” and “Oh Daddy” helped to revive the struggling label.

Milhaud’s most vivid accounts, however, relate his visits to Harlem that, he says, “had not yet been discovered by the snobs and aesthetes.” Milhaud, one of the first European composers to visit Harlem, was particularly taken with a performance at a Harlem nightclub where he believed he had tapped into the cultural roots of jazz:

A Negress whose grating voice seemed to come from the depths of the centuries, sang in front of the various tables. With despairing pathos and dramatic feeling, she sang over and over again, to the point of exhaustion . . . This authentic music had its roots in the darkest corners of the Negro soul, the vestigial traces of Africa no doubt.

Milhaud’s evocative description of this scene is strikingly different from any of his previous accounts of live jazz performances. Where Milhaud’s comments had previously been limited to descriptions of the music, in this instance Milhaud attempts to explain the cultural roots of jazz. While this recalls Milhaud’s earlier attempts to explain his own cultural roots that he had traced to the lyricism of Mediterranean and Jewish music, Bernard Gendron and Nancy Perloff take this description as evidence that Milhaud’s interest in jazz reflected an overarching French cultural phenomenon rather than a personal interest in folk and popular music. Given the extensive nature of the French

---

86 Lawrence Cohn, “Nothing but the Blues” (New York: Abbeville Press, 1999).
87 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 110.
88 Darius Milhaud, My Happy Life, 110. Based on Milhaud’s similar accounts in his 1927 memoir Études, Nancy Perloff speculates that Milhaud had visited the Capitol dance hall in Harlem, and the singer Milhaud heard was likely Ethel Watters, who was performing at the Capitol during that time (Perloff, 95).
preoccupation with African culture in the early twentieth century, it is necessary to look further into the accusation of merely superficial interest in jazz directed at Milhaud by Perloff and Gendron.

**Milhaud and the Exotic**

Although he had been interested in jazz since his 1919 encounter with it in London, Milhaud’s account of the Harlem nightclub and his connection between *St. Louis Blues* and African American folksongs invites speculation that his interest in jazz reflected mere fascination rather than a genuine interest. Milhaud’s reasoning for the later use of jazz in *La Création du monde* lay in his belief that the jazz he heard in Harlem could be traced to Africa. Similarly, his involvement with *La Création* suggests that, like his collaborators, Milhaud was to some extent smitten by Parisian “Negrophilia.” Nancy Perloff also attributes Milhaud’s collaboration on *La Création du monde* to “Milhaud’s admiration for the ‘primitive’ and his association of the ‘primitive’ with the exotic.”

This raises the question whether Milhaud’s interest in jazz was motivated more by his own personal interest, or by a fad of modernist fascination with the exotic. While evidence suggests that Milhaud, like his contemporaries, was fascinated with the novelty of jazz, his history of involvement with both Brazilian popular music and Jewish folk music, in addition to his clearly articulated ties to the French musical lineage, indicate a genuine, personal interest in jazz.

In his book *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club* philosopher Bernard Gendron classifies Milhaud’s interest in jazz as one of various modernist preoccupations with popular music during the twentieth century. Gendron classifies Milhaud’s approach

---

to jazz as a *flâneur* or “slummer.” Borrowed from Charles Baudelaire, this term refers to “the gentleman city stroller,” of Paris.\(^90\) According to Gendron, the *flâneur* is a “compulsive consumer of the new, the not yet fashionable, the outré, the evanescent on the margins of culture.”\(^91\) Gendron then attributes Milhaud’s fascination with culture and exotica to a modernist continuation of the impressionist aesthetic practice of bohemian slumming:

If we construe him as a prototypical modernist *flâneur*, we can more easily make sense of his excessively formalistic approach to jazz, his underestimation of performance at the expense of composition, his limited exposure to the wide variety of jazz bands, his simplistic schemes of classification (*“mechanical”* white jazz vs. *“primitive”* black jazz), and his virtual ignorance of the cultural and social context of jazz, we will be less surprised by his facile appeal to the most banal stereotypes of black music and culture.\(^92\)

Furthermore, Gendron also contrasts the *flâneur* with the *bricoleur*, or “tinkerer,” who approaches material with an attitude of irreverence, detachment, and nonchalance.\(^93\)

While Gendron does not classify Milhaud as a *bricoleur*, he indicates that “Milhaud’s authenticism tends to converge with the *bricolage* of Stravinsky when contrasted with the authenticism of the jazz scholar, the faithful interpreter of the jazz repertoire, or even the consummate fan.”\(^94\)

Gendron’s criticism of Milhaud goes too far. He fails to account for the fact that jazz scholars, faithful interpreters, or consummate fans did not exist during the late 1910s and early 1920s. Only a small number of articles concerning jazz appeared before 1920s, and those that did, such as Walter Kingsley’s “Whence Comes Jass?” discuss jazz as a

---

\(^91\) Gendron, *Montmartre*, 93.
\(^92\) Gendron, *Montmartre*, 94.
\(^93\) Gendron, *Montmartre*, 91.
\(^94\) Gendron, *Montmartre*, 91.
cultural phenomenon and cite few, if any, jazz musicians or specific recordings. Gunther Schuller acknowledged the difficulties of discussing jazz before 1923:

The problem of assessing the quality of early jazz is compounded further by the fact that the pre-1923 recordings that do exist (or even those that are presumed to exist) cannot all be considered jazz in the strictest sense. Most of these recordings were made by society orchestras, novelty bands, or jazz groups who were forced by the companies recording them to play novelty or polite dance music.⁹⁵

The “consummate fans” of jazz, were predominantly limited to dancers, who listened to jazz in nightclubs and dancehalls, and the early instrumentalists, who had yet to solidify their approach into a genre. Milhaud met with a scholar of African folk music (Burleigh), purchased recordings, and attended numerous concerts of various styles while visiting New York. Such efforts indicate much more than mere fascination with primitivist aesthetics. If Milhaud is, indeed, to be construed as a flâneur, then this particular flâneur represents one of the more consummate fans of jazz of the period. Gendron is correct that Milhaud, like many of his contemporaries, was interested in jazz. Milhaud, however, made a far greater effort to penetrate the jazz idiom than any of his European modernist contemporaries.

Gendron additionally takes Milhaud’s seemingly brief period of fascination with jazz as evidence of his possessing only a superficial interest in it. While Gendron calls Milhaud’s autobiography “a tale of a world traveler and slumming artist whose creations are substantially enriched by what he picks up along the way,”⁹⁶ he neglects to acknowledge the opening chapters of Milhaud’s autobiography, that outline Milhaud’s connections to the music and culture of his Mediterranean homeland and Jewish culture in great detail. Milhaud’s interest in popular music represents an outgrowth of his interest

---

⁹⁶ Gendron, Montmartre, 92.
in establishing a “clearer, sturdier, more precise type of French art,”⁹⁷ and his commitment to French culture, rather than to himself. In 1927, Milhaud asserted that “the influence of jazz has passed over like a beneficent storm, in whose wake we find purer skies and more reassuring weather.”⁹⁸ To Milhaud, jazz represented a positive influence on French music, and he was ready to move on. Though Milhaud’s jazz inspired works were limited to La Création and two piano works, he held high regard for jazz throughout his life. Jazz composer and performer Dave Brubeck recalled that while studying with Milhaud at Mills College in 1946, Milhaud named Duke Ellington and George Gershwin as two of the most important American composers.⁹⁹

While Milhaud may be accused of ignorance for a limited or stereotypical view of African culture, he should not be accused of superficiality. Milhaud followed the roots of jazz to Harlem and attempted to connect with what he believed to be the living jazz culture. His reaction to the “negress” in the Harlem jazz club provides an insight into his interpretation not only of the cultural origins of jazz, but its music and culture as a whole. Jazz fascinated Milhaud as a folk or traditional art form, and it appealed to his consistent interest in folk music. Milhaud’s attempt to connect the sounds of the Harlem “negress” with Africa resembles the connection he draws between the temperament of his music and his Mediterranean homeland and Jewish religion. His attempt to create this connection, regardless of its viability, indicates a desire to place stylistic effects of jazz in a greater context, rather than simply copy them. Milhaud’s fascination with folk music was an ongoing process, rather than an isolated incident of brief passing interest. His

⁹⁸ Darius Milhaud, Études (Paris: C. Aveline, 1927), 22.
passionate interest in jazz as well as other folk music reflects his individual esteem for culture and tradition.
CHAPTER III
THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

As one of the earliest works to synthesize early American jazz and the classical
tradition, _La Création du monde_ carved its niche in history. But not immediately. When
Milhaud decided to study jazz in 1919 in order to incorporate it into a work, jazz had
hardly codified into a genre. Rather, it still encompassed aspects of ragtime, dance music,
blues, and band music. For example, French critics declared his ballet to be more suitable
for the dance hall than the concert hall or stage. Ten years after the 1923 French
premiere, _La Création_ premiered in the United States as a chamber work in the midst of a
whirlwind of works combining jazz with American modernism. In America, the work
received a strikingly different reception, being well-received by both critics and the circle
of American modernists. This chapter will examine the origins and score of _La Création
du monde_ and discuss how differing political and cultural landscapes of early 1920s
France and early 1930s America invited strikingly different receptions of _La Création._

**Genesis**

_La Création du monde_ premiered on October 25th, 1923. The main collaborators
were Milhaud; writer Blaise Cendrars, who created the scenario; dancer and
choreographer Jean Börlin; and painter Fernand Léger, who provided costume and set
designs. Milhaud, who had met Léger and Cendrars through the artists in _Les Six_,
mentions in his autobiography that he “remained more closely in contact with [his]

---

100 Milhaud, _My Happy Life_, 120.
collaborators than for any other of [his] works.\textsuperscript{101} The ballet, twenty minutes in length, ran for only twelve performances and is rarely danced today, though Milhaud’s accompanying score soon after gained popularity as a work for chamber orchestra.\textsuperscript{102} In a 1970 interview, Milhaud identified the orchestral version of \textit{La Création} as one of his three most frequently performed works.\textsuperscript{103}

One of the aesthetic goals of \textit{La Création du monde} involved presenting an evocative visual experience for the audience, and this goal often took precedence over the cultural authenticity of the performance. The Ballets Suédois, founded by Swedish art collector Rolf de Maré, was dedicated to both “presenting work derived from ethnic dances of all countries, and creating a Gesamtkunstwerk, uniting art of all other media.”\textsuperscript{104} The work was adapted from a Fang creation myth that Blaise Cendrars documented in his \textit{Anthologie nègre}, a collection of translated African myths.\textsuperscript{105} The Fang are one of three major groups making up the Beti-Pahuin, inhabitants of the rain forest regions of Gabon, an area that Cendrars had visited during his travels with a jewel merchant at age 15. The action of \textit{La Création} begins with a creation scene, in which the three masters of creation—Nzame, Medere, and N’kva—circle on stilts to form the primordial mass. In the second act, out of this mass, the first life springs forth as a tree grows, sprouts and gives rise to new trees and eventually an elephant. Further animals including monkeys, crabs and turtles burst forth, each performing a solo dance before joining the rest by the

\textsuperscript{101} Milhaud, \textit{My Happy Life}, 117.
side. Act III enacts the creation of the first man and woman, born of the chaos set in motion by the three gods of creation yet again. Act IV concludes with a mating dance between the couple, who are soon joined one by one with each of the previous creatures. The act climaxes with the participation of all members in a final dance.

According to Milhaud, Léger drew upon “primitive Negro art” and “African divinities expressive of power and darkness.” Léger, however, made no claim to authenticity, admitting that he intended to create “an evocative atmosphere.” Richard Brender indicates that while Léger may have based his interpretations on African art, his finished product was far from “authentic”:

It is a depiction of African masks, not a desire to adapt an African painting style to an artist’s ends. And the figures themselves are weird hybrids. Most are too patched together, after the manner of synthetic cubism, to be read as coherent spatial entities, much less as possessing characteristics of real tribal sculpture.

Milhaud recounts that Léger “was never satisfied that his sketches were terrifying enough” and even mentions that Léger wanted animal skins to represent trees, flowers, and animals which “would have been filled with gas and allowed to fly up into the air at the moment of creation.” Léger was clearly concerned with evoking an atmosphere rather than representing culture authentically.

Choreographer Jean Börlin, who danced in the lead role of La Création, also choreographed the premiere of Cole Porter’s jazz ballet Within the Quota that premiered the same night. Unlike the avant-garde productions produced by Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes, the Ballets Suédois was a ballet company in the traditional sense. Richard Brender speculates that “outside novelties such as stilt dancing and four-legged dancing,

---

106 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 118.
107 Brender, Reinventing Africa, 131.
108 Brender, Reinventing Africa, 130.
109 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 118.
Börlin basically relied on classical ballet technique.” He furthers this argument by noting that “reviews of La Création du monde certainly make it sound balletic through their careful evaluation of its ballet technique.”

Unlike Börlin and Léger, Milhaud’s approach to the music of La Création du monde was inspired more by careful research than imagination. In the midst of the African myth and folklore, Milhaud added the sounds of American jazz, re-emphasizing his connection between his experience in Harlem and his imagined perception of Africa. Milhaud’s use of jazz source material, however, was unlike that of any of his predecessors. Where his collaborators combined their imaginary impressions with imitations and evocations of African art they had seen, Milhaud saw the ballet as his opportunity to demonstrate the fruits of his extensive research of American jazz, whose roots, Milhaud determined, traced to Africa.

**The Constitution of La Création**

Jazz indicated a combination of genres rather than a single, geographically specific genre. Though Milhaud denied any preconceived approach to his treatment of folk material, he approached jazz in a manner similar to that of Bartók, having both listened to various sources and immersed himself in jazz clubs of Harlem. Presented with the opportunity to provide music for the African-inspired La Création du monde, he was delighted to find an outlet for his rigorous study of jazz:

> At last in La Création du monde I had the opportunity I had been waiting for to use those elements of jazz to which I had devoted so much study. I adopted the

---

110 Brender, Reinventing Africa, 131.
111 Rostand, Interviews, 69.
same orchestra as used in Harlem, seventeen solo instruments, and I made wholesale use of the jazz style to convey a purely classical feeling.\textsuperscript{112}

Milhaud’s “wholesale use” of jazz included aspects of nearly every jazz influence he had encountered, from the Billy Arnold Band in London to the numerous nights at the Harlem jazz clubs. Rather than representing one particular strand of jazz, Milhaud’s \textit{La Création du monde} reveals a variety of jazz influences including ragtime, blues, syncopated music, and American and French dance music.

Milhaud scored \textit{La Création} for twenty solo instruments; two flutes, oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, alto saxophone, horn, trumpets, trombone, tuba, timpani, two percussionists, two violins, cello, double bass, and piano. He adopted the instrumentation for \textit{La Création} from Maceo Pinkard’s \textit{Liza}, a musical he had attended in a black musical theatre in Harlem.\textsuperscript{113} Milhaud added oboe, bassoon, and horn to Pinkard’s instrumentation of flute, clarinet, cornet, trumpet, trombone, string quartet (with alto saxophone substituting for viola), and percussion. The assortment of percussion instruments, including timbales; wood and metal blocks; tambourine; snare, tenor, and bass drum; timpani; and cymbals, show the continued influence of his experience in Brazil, as well as the exotic environment of the ballet. The string quartet would not have been uncommon, with entire string sections being employed by the orchestras of James Reese Europe, who influenced much of the early syncopated dance orchestras. (Most of Fletcher Henderson’s recordings on the Black Swan label, by contrast, rarely feature more than a single violin.) Milhaud also makes particular use of the instruments typical of a jazz ensemble to present much of the melodic material in \textit{La Création} as in the instruments presenting the fugue subject (R.11)—double bass, saxophone, trombone,

\textsuperscript{112} Milhaud, \textit{My Happy Life}, 118.
\textsuperscript{113} Milhaud, \textit{Études}, 57.
trumpet, and clarinet respectively. The piano mainly accompanies, rarely presenting melodic material, and the percussion provides a syncopated backbeat during most of the faster sections.

The overture begins with a haunting saxophone solo. The tonality of the beginning does not suggest jazz, and only a syncopated background figure in the percussion and trumpets gives any indication of possible jazz influence. The first movement features a fugue, played against an aggressively syncopated backbeat. The fugue subject, a bluesy motive characterized by the lowered third and seventh scale degrees, is presented successively in the double bass, saxophone, trombone, trumpet, and clarinet.

The second and third movements fluctuate between the slower classical style of the overture and aggressive counterpoint of the first movement. Initially, featuring significantly less counterpoint, the French horn, cello, oboe, and flute—none of which is a common jazz instrument—present the blues motive. The second movement also features strings in a smooth, orchestrated jazz style characteristic of either Paul Whiteman or Leo Reismann. The third movement returns to the more active style of the first movement, underlined by a syncopated figure in the strings and featuring the trumpet, trombone, piano and clarinet. The interplay between the instruments suggests collective improvisation with occasional unison punctuations in the brass. The third movement retreats suddenly into a lush restatement of the blues theme in the oboe, which is repeated in the strings.

---

114 The designation “movement” of the sections of La Création are indicated by roman numerals within the score.
The fourth movement, beginning with the mating dance by the newly created couple, prominently features the clarinet imitating an improvised solo. The melody utilizes the rhythmic motive of the blues theme with very little strict repetition and heavy syncopation. In the final dance which includes all creation, the saxophone clarinet solo restates the clarinet solo as the piece climaxes with dense contrapuntal interplay of the trombone, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, and percussion, a texture reminiscent of the collective improvisation of the early New Orleans small ensemble jazz. This fittingly corresponds to a final dance between the couple followed by participation of all members. The fifth movement brings the ballet to a reverent close with final statements of the opening saxophone figure as the oboe and flute briefly reprise the blues motive.

One of the most curious aspects of La Création is its use of a fugue. While the fugue plays during the ballet’s “creation of things,” Perloff notes that in La Création “the correspondence between action and music is by no means exact,” and the entrances of the fugue’s subject do not correspond with the successive creation of things depicted on stage.\(^\text{115}\) Not only does the fugue seem misplaced among the jazz tonality and instrumentation, but given Milhaud’s long history of struggles with harmony, it seems unlikely that he would employ such a device. Milhaud had attended the Paris Conservatoire, which valued studies in counterpoint. Milhaud claimed that in his early studies in Xavier Leroux’s harmony class, he was “quite incapable” of handling harmony.\(^\text{116}\) His early affinity for chromaticism led to unorthodox contrapuntal writing, and he struggled in fugal writing and modal counterpoint.

\(^{115}\) Perloff, Art and the Everyday, 202.
\(^{116}\) Milhaud, My Happy Life, 42.
Milhaud’s willingness to employ a fugue reflects a shift in emphasis to melody from harmony that coincides with his increased use of polytonality. In my estimation, the fugue subject, that relies heavily on the use of the lowered third or “blue note” shows less of the influence of the syncopated bands of Paul Whiteman or Billy Arnold than the blues flavor that Milhaud would have encountered in Harlem and particularly in W.C. Handy’s *St. Louis Blues* (1914). The blue note motive (D to F), that Milhaud introduces with the fugue, recurs throughout the piece and forms the basis of its jazz flavor.

![Example 1: Milhaud, La Création du monde](image)

Milhaud’s repeated use of the blue note motive closely corresponds to Handy’s use of it in *St. Louis Blues*. An early standard of dance bands in the United States, Milhaud likely heard *St. Louis Blues* performed by Jean Wiener at the Bar Gaya where Ferdinand Legér requested it frequently. French critic André Hodeir also praises Milhaud’s accurate contextual use of the blue note, as a fluctuation of the major third, rather than a substitute for it.

While *La Création du monde* has no improvisatory sections, it includes a number of solo features, most for instruments typical of the early jazz ensembles. Each of these

---

117 Barbara Kelly notes that between 1917 and 1922, Milhaud shifted his emphasis from vertical harmony to melodic writing. See Kelly, *Tradition and Style*. Milhaud demonstrates this shift in *L’Enfant prodigue* (1917) which employed a chamber orchestra of 21 players, each with its own independent line. See Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, 72.


instruments is given a solo either during the fugue or, in the case of the clarinet, during a written out solo (R. 35) in which the clarinet line imitates an improvised solo.

Over a repeated rhythmic figure in the piano, saxophone, and strings, the clarinet presents and develops a solo using the rhythmic motive of the accompaniment and main theme with very little strict repetition and heavy syncopation. A similar effect is achieved with the trumpet (R. 44) that is eventually joined by the saxophone (R. 46) and the trombone (R. 47).

**French and American Reception**

Based on the reports given by Milhaud and his contemporaries, *La Création du monde* generally received tepid reviews. Though Milhaud gives very few details regarding the premiere of *La Création*, in his autobiography Milhaud mentions that, following the premiere, critics decreed Milhaud’s music to be “frivolous and more suitable for a restaurant or a dance hall than for the concert hall.”¹²⁰ Madeleine Milhaud

---

¹²⁰ Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, 120.
reported a similar reaction from the press, saying that critics considered it music for
nightclubs. Milhaud then indicates that “ten years later the selfsame critics were
discussing the philosophy of jazz and learnedly demonstrating that La Création was the
best of my works.” Milhaud’s work predated and partially contributed to the
popularization of jazz, but did not yet have a place within the realm of concert music. In
adopting jazz for a chamber work, Milhaud had accomplished what he had set out to do.
Although Milhaud may have been done with jazz, jazz was not done with La Création.

In 1923, jazz still represented an emerging genre, slowly gaining ground through
popular recordings and dance bands. By contrast, the American public in 1933 seemed
obsessed with jazz, with Milhaud noting the plethora of method books and popular
recordings. Placed in the context of many other works of its kind, La Création du
monde was hailed as a model by American modernists and, by virtue of its chronology,
contrasted La Création with George Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue. The popularization
and legitimization of jazz revived interest in La Création du monde, yet the work’s
increasing fame hinged on the American modernist affection for jazz and a reaction
against Gershwin. It had little to do with Milhaud.

Robert Schmitz of Pro Musica invited Milhaud to tour the United States in 1933
for a concert series promoting contemporary music. The years between 1923 and 1933
brought a spate of jazz-inspired works by American composers. These included George
Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue, George Antheil’s Ballet Mecanique (1924) and Jazz
Symphony (1925), Gershwin’s Concerto in F (1927), Aaron Copland’s Piano Concerto
(1929), and William Grant Still’s Afro-American Symphony (1931). Although Milhaud

121 Nichols, Conversations with Madeleine, 52.
122 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 120.
123 Milhaud, My Happy Life, 146.
relates that American reporters were “disappointed” by his disenchantment with jazz, *La Création* was received with open arms following its Philadelphia premiere. Composers such as Virgil Thompson and Aaron Copland lauded its superiority to Gershwin’s *Rhapsody.* This reception may have reflected an American public divided between emerging American modernism and the early stages of jazz’ march to highbrow legitimization as an art form, that would come in the form of bebop during the 1940s.

In the late 1920s and early 30s, however, jazz suffered from an identity crisis. While jazz had been slowly gathering steam as the celebrated uniquely American art form, connotations of race and class complicated its reception. While the American public regarded jazz primarily as dance music, the popularity of big band jazz and swing and the presence of classically-trained African American jazz composers slowly increased its legitimacy. The 1920s in America saw a drastic rise in the popularity and marketability of black musicians. Following the brief success of the Black Swan label, labels such as Columbia and Paramount signed major artists including Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Fletcher Henderson, and Duke Ellington. Major labels saw the appeal of jazz and the high number of black recording artists was soon followed by a surge in black entertainment, with Armstrong and Ellington even appearing in mainstream films such as *Pennies From Heaven* (1936) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943).

Seeking to benefit from the cultivation of “civilized” jazz the Paul Whiteman Jazz Orchestra premiered George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924). Inspired by Gershwin’s one-act opera *Blue Monday* (1922), Whiteman had commissioned Gershwin to compose *Rhapsody* for his orchestra. Whiteman later encouraged the composition of

---

124 Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, 120.
jazz-inspired works and commissioned various composers to submit works to be performed by his own “modern orchestra,” that consisted of an “ensemble of soloists” approach similar to that of Milhaud’s works for chamber symphony. Whiteman sought to separate himself from the African American culture of jazz, boasting of his orchestra’s avoidance of improvisation, saying that his orchestra used only written music and that he “forbade his players to depart from the script.”

While Whiteman’s approach could be admired for its ambition in trying to present jazz to the widest possible audience—geographically and socially—it had difficulty matching the success of his *Rhapsody in Blue*. Even the initial performance of *Rhapsody* had generated mixed reviews, and many of the similar works performed in the following years failed to achieve comparable success. Following the premiere of *Rhapsody*, Whiteman focused his efforts on American modernist music rather than the cultivation of “civilized jazz.”

The rising legitimacy of jazz inevitably conflicted with the emerging generation of American modernist composers. Critical reviews of *Rhapsody*, while unspectacular, lauded the work as the most substantial and successful bridging of art music and jazz to date. This posed a threat to the American modernist circle of composers who, like the French *Les Six* ten years earlier, sought to walk the line between high and low art. Gershwin’s critical success was met with a variety of back-handed compliments from the modernist circle, led by pro-modernist critic Paul Rosenfeld. “If newspaper critics, among others, were going to praise Gershwin at the expense of the young modernists,” Carol Oja notes, “then Rosenfeld and other supporters of American new music would

---

elevate their candidates through similar tactics."¹²⁸ Virgil Thomson called Gershwin’s *Rhapsody* “scraps of bully jazz sewed together with oratory and cadenzas of Liszt,”¹²⁹ and George Antheil identified Gershwin’s work as “very mediocre.”¹³⁰ Seeking a figure to usurp Gershwin at the forefront, modernists critics first offered Aaron Copland, whose *Piano Concerto* (1927) was lauded as truly elevating jazz where *Rhapsody* had not.¹³¹

Only a year before, Cole Porter encountered almost the exact opposite reception of his work. Following a successful premiere in Paris of his ballet *Within the Quota*, premiered on a double bill with *La Création*, the Ballets Suédois began its American tour in November of 1923, hardly a month after the Paris world premiere. Where *Rhapsody in Blue* had been accused of being not modernist enough, Porter was generally accused of being too modernist and more French than American. Francis D. Perkins of the *Tribune*, commented that Cole had “drunk deeply of the Milhaud-Honegger spring” and that his jazz “smacked of…Darius Milhaud rather than George Gershwin.”¹³² While the music received some favorable reviews, the critical reception largely resembled the Paris reception of *La Création du monde*, where critics insisted that music belonged in a different (in this case, more modernist) setting. He attempted a second ballet with M. Léon Bakst of the Ballets Russes, but following Bakst’s death and the folding of the Ballets Suédois, Porter “turned his back on [serious music] to concentrate on getting ahead as a popular songwriter.”¹³³ The music, that was lost following the 1924 premiere

¹³³ Schwartz, *Gershwin*, 83.
until 1989, was likely never heard by the American collective of modernist composers who would later praise Milhaud’s work of the same vein.

The American premiere of *La Création du monde* occurred in December of 1933, performed by the New Chamber Orchestra conducted by Bernard Herrmann in New York. Copland, who had seen the work at its 1923 premiere in France, admired Milhaud immensely. American critics also admired *La Création*, and the praise that it received rested partly on a reaction against *Rhapsody in Blue*.\textsuperscript{134} *La Création du monde* increasingly was held up as a precursor of Copland and the whole jazz-modernist movement. In the process, Gershwin’s role, as chronicled and perceived within the concert-music world, was diminished.\textsuperscript{135} In its inevitable comparisons with George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody*, critics generally preferred Milhaud’s work. They tended to highlight the fact that *La Création* had been written a year before *Rhapsody*, and many critics tended to exaggerate this difference, with one *New York Times* commentator writing that “Milhaud’s ‘Creation of the World,’ except that it employs a wider idiom and a deeper reach, sounds in places like good Gershwin—indeed, as if part of it had been lifted from the ‘Rhapsody in Blue’—save that it was *written some years earlier*.\textsuperscript{136}

*La Création*, indeed, did come out a year before Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. Neither Gershwin nor Milhaud, however, demonstrated any knowledge of the other’s jazz-inspired classical work. Gershwin, while an admirer of Milhaud’s *Concertino de Printemps* for violin and orchestra (1934) shows no indication of familiarity with *La

\textsuperscript{134} Marc Blitzstein, “My Lady Jazz,” *The Review 9/6* (5 February 1926), 17.
\textsuperscript{135} Oja, “Gershwin and American Modernists,” 660.
\textsuperscript{136} Oja, “Gershwin and American Modernists,” 659.
Similarly, Milhaud, who had encountered some works by Gershwin through performances by Jean Wiéner, has no documented reactions to *Rhapsody*. Gershwin biographer Howard Pollack suggests that “received wisdom presumes that both composers, similarly molded by American jazz and Jewish sensibilities, arrived at their related styles independently.” Nonetheless, Pollack echoes Deborah Mawer’s assertion that “Milhaud got there first.”

Milhaud had a competitive advantage over Gershwin and Porter in that he approached the divide between art music and popular music from the perspective of art music, whereas Porter and Gershwin had difficulty shedding their labels as composers of popular music. Porter, who seemed to have arrived too early to gain the attention of the modernist circle, was too similar to Milhaud while the modernists claimed Gershwin was not similar enough. With the emergence of jazz as a genre, America in the 1930s, unlike France in the early 1920s, embraced works that bridged the divide between high and low art. Regardless, to bridge this gap was not the intention of Milhaud or Gershwin.

Gershwin scholar David Schiff also acknowledges the treatment of *Rhapsody* as a “cultural object,” saying:

I am less interested in deciding which side of an argument was right than in identifying the common ways in which the symbolic connotations of the *Rhapsody* were identified and manipulated. Most of these strategies had little to do with Gershwin’s aesthetic goals, or the popular understanding of his works.

Schiff acknowledges the separation between the intent of the composer and the reception of the public. Whatever their intentions, Milhaud, Gershwin, and Porter’s works that incorporated elements of classical and popular music were judged not by what they

---

139 David Schiff, *Rhapsody in Blue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 86.
accomplished, but by what they represented. The critical success of these works, as a result, hinged much more strongly on the reception of the concept—jazz-inspired works by classical composers—than the content.
CONCLUSION

Milhaud, an individual who clearly saw himself as part of the lineage of French composers, approached jazz believing that it had something to offer to his own style, and subsequently, French music. His ties to his provincial homeland of Aix, as well as his passion for his religion, instilled in him both an interest and respect for folk music. His association with Les Six reinforced his commitment to a new French style rooted in melody and lyricism, rather than a style rooted in harmony that he associated with Debussy. Jazz, therefore, appealed to Milhaud as both a potential positive influence on French music and a folk music that shared the lyricism of his own Mediterranean and Jewish musical heritage.

La Création du monde, for Milhaud, involved both a personal interest in folk music (jazz) and his interest in adapting the form for use in a composition. As opposed to his contemporaries who largely imitated the end product of jazz culture, Milhaud carefully studied to develop a brad stylistic fluency with the music. Additionally, he sought to place the music in a cultural context as he had done with his own style. Milhaud’s past interest in folk music and the strong ties he asserts between his culture and his homeland created a context for Milhaud’s comparison of the music he heard in America to “vestigial traces of Africa.” Rather than being accused of superficiality in his relation to his source material, Milhaud should be lauded for attempting to understand jazz in a cultural context before adopting the idiom.

American critics placed Milhaud’s work into a greater context, inflating it by comparing it with Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue, while French critics (and Bernard
Gendron), by contrast, deflated the work and dismissed it as simply a modernist foray into popular music. Both misconceptions reflected two critical responses that treated *La Création* as something it was not. It was not Milhaud’s ideal of French music, but it did reflect the simplicity and lyricism that he sought for French music in response to impressionism. *La Création* succeeded in America in the early 1930s due to Milhaud’s esteemed position among modernists who praised his work over Gershwin’s work of a remarkably similar vein. While critics such as Bernard Gendron have criticized Milhaud’s choice of source material and debated the extent to which the end product resembles “authentic jazz,” Milhaud’s attitude toward adopting and understanding American jazz—one of understanding the music from its source rather than simply its sounds—placed him years beyond his modernist peers who, with the exception of Bartók, were content with superficial imitation or the use of secondhand source material.

In comparison to the early twentieth century, the digital age has encouraged and eased cultural exchange more than ever before. The emphasis on geographical culture, the culture we are born into and raised with, has shifted to an emphasis on personal culture (or identity), the culture we adopt through exchange, experience, and research. Today’s postmodern world not only allows, but also encourages intercultural discourse, and in some cases thrives upon it. Milhaud penetrates deeper than simply a surface level imitation of American jazz by seeking an understanding of the music through immersion rather than simply observation. He demonstrates an empathetic attitude toward geographic culture and a revolutionary attitude toward personal culture, foreshadowing our modern society in which culture encompasses more than just the heritage we are born
into, but also those cultures we adopt—through experience, environment, or mere curiosity—into our individual identities.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Osgood, Henry. *So This is Jazz*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company. 1956.


