

Darius Milhaud: *La Création du monde, op. 81a* (1923)

Out of all this has come one real masterpiece, one full-length, fully developed jazz work that had such character and originality that even today it sounds as fresh as it did when it was written in 1923. It is a ballet called *The Creation of the World*, by the brilliant French composer Darius Milhaud. I take the liberty of calling this work a masterpiece because it has the one real requisite of a masterpiece—durability. Among all those experiments with jazz that Europe flirted with in this period, only *The Creation of the World* emerges complete, not as a flirtation but as a real love affair with jazz.

Leonard Bernstein

Milhaud's *Création du Monde* was the first and remains the best jazz piece from a classical European composer.

Dave Brubeck

American popular culture became an international trendsetter with the emergence of jazz at the end of World War I. While much of the American artistic establishment at the time dismissed jazz as unworthy, European composers, including Paul Hindemith and Igor Stravinsky, recognized it as a valid and exciting art form, incorporating this style into new works. With its freedom of interpretation, its complex rhythmic vitality, and its unique and subtle timbral combinations, jazz influenced the works of a generation of composers seeking alternatives to the extreme Romanticism of the end of the 19th century. As S. Frederick Starr observes:

New popular dance rhythms and new textures of sound have always excited and inspired composers in the classical tradition of Western music. Bach was intrigued by such popular dances of his day as the *chaconne* and the *pavanne*. Chopin found inspiration in his native Polish *mazurka*.... Other popular influences came and went, often within a few years or at most a decade. But American popular dance rhythms—especially ragtime and jazz—have given rise to great classical compositions for a century already, and the love affair between the two is still as fresh as spring. The syncopated rhythms and distinctive tonalities of America's multi-ethnic music seem to have a special appeal to classical composers, especially those on the cutting edge.... Nowhere was the jazz age more intense and jazz's impact on avant-garde composers more profound than in Paris in the 1920s. Visiting American jazz groups like Sam Wooding's band were all the rage. The African-American singer-dancer Josephine Baker found a cult following in the nightclubs of Montmartre [where Milhaud lived].... Soon the young rebels of French classical music, dubbed "Les Six," were all experimenting with jazz rhythms and jazz sonorities. Darius Milhaud was a leader of this movement.

Among the most prolific of twentieth-century composers—with a catalogue running well past 400 works and in every conceivable genre—Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) absorbed music wherever he went and transmuted the received impressions into his own work. Be it the popular music of Brazil (*Le boeuf sur le toit* or *Suadades do Brazil*) or the folk music of France (*Suite française*), Milhaud constantly demonstrated his belief that to try to assimilate was to create; while "other musics" would serve to fire his imagination, there is no doubt that Milhaud's unique imprint is on each of his works. Milhaud became intrigued with the latent potential of jazz when he heard the Billy Arnold Jazz Band playing in a Hammersmith dance hall in London in 1920; he became obsessed after a trip to New York City in 1922. He spent many evenings listening to the Leo Reisman Band and the Paul Whiteman orchestra, trying to analyze and assimilate this music. He took many trips to Harlem to hear the black musicians play in clubs which were still wholly unfrequented by white musicians, and he took home to France a collection of Black Swan "race" records which he played again and again. As he commented: "This authentic music had its roots in the most remote elements of the black soul, in vestigial African traces perhaps. It moved me so that I could not detach myself from it." (Milhaud's wife Madeleine added: "[Darius] discovered the jazz music that expresses the sorrow of a people complaining of the injustice of which they were victims.") Milhaud was determined to use jazz—which he described as "music that was completely different, the melodic lines, set off by the percussion, overlapping contrapuntally in a throbbing mixture of broken, twisted rhythms"—as the basis of a chamber work.

Ballet, not chamber music, ultimately provided the advantageous framework for a sophisticated, sensitive evocation of such jazz performances. As with other Paris composers such as Debussy and Stravinsky, writing for the ballet became for Milhaud the impetus for writing a work that would become a significant monument of early twentieth-century music. When the impresario Rolf de Maré of the Ballets Suédois asked him to write a new ballet based on African creation myths in collaboration with the surrealist writer Blaise Cendrars, the scene designer Fernand Léger and choreographer Jean Börlin, Milhaud had found the outlet needed. The primitivism of Cendrars' scenario centered not on a violent, turbulent clash of primeval forces (as is often encountered in western cultures), but rather on a more confident and congruous development, on the love between Man and Woman. *La Création du monde* premiered on October 25, 1923 (a year before Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, despite the apparent "borrowings!"), creating scandal and meeting initial critical bewilderment. (As Madeleine recounts: "It was a superb spectacle! I have rarely seen such beautiful décors and costumes as those of Léger for this production. It had a tremendous success, although the critics considered it music for the nightclubs, at least for a year.") While immediate critical reaction to Milhaud's score was that it was frivolous, Darius noted dryly in *Notes Without Music*: "Ten years later the selfsame critics were discussing the philosophy of jazz and learnedly demonstrating that *La Création* was the best of my works."

As Milhaud admitted, he "used the style of jazz without reserve, mixing it with a classical feeling," even adopting the exact instrumentation of the jazz opera *Liza* of Pinkard which he heard in Harlem: a chamber orchestra of eighteen instruments, including a string quartet with a saxophone replacing the viola, and with a rhythm section of drums (plus timpani), piano, and bass. The work opens in darkness ("Overture"), an inchoate mass of dancers poised on stage. Over subtly shifting harmonies (betraying Milhaud's burgeoning love of poly-modality, the overture opens in a combination of major and minor modalities), a sweetly tender, almost Bach-like melody played on the saxophone elicits slinking responses from the two trumpets that provide the first hints of jazz in the work. With a hailstorm created by the piano and drums (Tableau I: "The Chaos Before Creation"), the prelude gives way to, of all things, an intricate jazz fugue; depicting the African gods of creation Mzamé, Mebère, and Nkwa creating the world out of a chaotic mass, each new fugue statement portrays the sprouting and hatching of a new world—explosive, yet tightly organized. The frenzy stops suddenly, and the next developmental section (Tableau II: "The slowly lifting darkness, the creation of trees, plants, insects, birds, and beasts") parallels the evolution of the creatures of the natural world. As Rory Gury has written:

Out of the central mass of entwined bodies, life commenced to erupt. Trees shot up, leaves fell from their branches and, touching the earth, metamorphosed into strange animals. Each creature evolved individually. At last human appendages began to appear—a leg, a torso, and finally a complete man and a complete woman.

One can hear the slow evolving trees in the oboe, the rapidly developing animals in the fragments that continually pop through the texture, the excited world anticipating the arrival of Man and Woman in the tense, twittering flutes, and the humans arrive, testing their new bodies in a restless, oft-clumsy capriccio (Tableau III: "Man and Woman created"). As Man and Woman notice each other, a sensual dance combines the capriccio in mellow flutes with the oboe melody, now in the two violins. From this emerges the flirtatious and seductive dance of courtship and mating (Tableau IV: "The desire of Man and Woman"), a long-arching clarinet solo punctuated by syncopated rhythms derived from the fugue subject, only to explode into a veritable rhythmic tempest, with music coming from seemingly every corner of the world—the dance of fulfillment, the dance of creation. The saxophone returns us to the gentleness and serenity of the opening (although with ethereal harmonies which are decidedly brighter, more optimistic than in the overture)—the opening darkness of Chaos supplanted by the radiant light of the newly created world (Tableau V: "The Man and Woman kiss"). Cendrars' script ends with the following:

The couple is joined.

The dance subsides, is slowed and restrained, everything grows calm.

Group by group, the dancers disperse, and the couple, locked in an embrace, drifts offstage as if borne by a wave.

It is spring.