

Saxophone highlights Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra concert in New York

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The Mostly Mozart Festival, which had its origins as a summertime series of concerts decades ago in the early years of New York’s Lincoln Center performing arts complex, skipped its 2020 season and returned with an abbreviated schedule in both 2021 and this year.

There seems to be a question mark over the future of this feature of Lincoln Center’s summer programming, an unwelcome sign of the continuing devaluation of classical music and the music education that should accompany it.

At the same time, the series of 10 concerts by the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra at Alice Tully Hall in the current two-week period points in a more promising direction, one that appeals to a broader audience with unusual programs, without “dumbing down” the art form. Last Saturday evening, in the midst of a week-long heat wave, the Mostly Mozart ensemble presented one of those unusual programs to an enthusiastic audience. No doubt as part of an effort to expand its audience base, Lincoln Center, apparently for the first time, also gave ticket-buyers a “choose-what-you-pay” option, offering tickets for as little as \$5 for good orchestra seating.

The program began with *Primal Message*, a short work by Nokuthula Ngwenyama, a violist and composer of mixed Zimbabwean and Japanese parentage. The work, which was receiving its New York premiere, and whose theme deals with the possibility of other life forms in the universe, was appealing on a first hearing.

That was followed by the evening’s saxophone soloist, Steven Banks, performing two works: the *Concerto for Saxophone and String Orchestra* by Russian composer Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936), followed by the *Concertino da Camera* by French composer Jacques Ibert (1890-1962), for saxophone

and a small ensemble that included some woodwinds and brass instruments, in addition to strings.

Beethoven’s Fourth Symphony, which concluded the program, is always welcome, but it was the two symphonic works for saxophone that attracted most attention and were at its heart.

The saxophone, a wind instrument that was not invented until the 1840s, has been most prominently associated with jazz. Musicians such as Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane are inseparably identified with the saxophone.

The powerful, vivid influence of jazz, first pioneered by African American performers and/or composers like Jelly Roll Morton, Sidney Bechet and Louis Armstrong, found its way into classical music during the third and fourth decades of the 20th century. At that point, the popular enthusiasm for jazz in the US and Europe as well was at its high point

Composers like George Gershwin, Maurice Ravel, Darius Milhaud and numerous others ignored or rejected the sneers of those who claimed jazz idioms and rhythms had no place in their music.

It’s no accident that both the Glazunov and Ibert works featured at the Mostly Mozart concert were composed in the 1930s—Glazunov’s in 1934 and Ibert’s only one year later. Relatively few classical works have incorporated the instrument. Debussy’s *Rhapsody for Saxophone and Orchestra* is one. Ravel’s orchestration of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* uses a saxophone, as does Prokofiev’s *Lieutenant Kijé Suite*, which also dates from the 1930s. The important Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos composed for the saxophone. In recent decades, more composers have used the instrument. Notably, John Adams composed a concerto for saxophone.

The Glazunov concerto is a relatively short work,

about 15 minutes in length. It is largely in the Romantic style for which the composer was known, in works like *The Seasons*, the *Raymonda* ballet and his eight symphonies. Glazunov came of age in the era of Dvořák and Tchaikovsky. He was always regarded as a musical conservative, a view that became more widespread in the 20th century.

The composer, born in Saint Petersburg, was past 50 at the time of the October Revolution. He remained in Russia during the early years of the Soviet Union (and headed the Leningrad Conservatory when Shostakovich was a student there). Although Glazunov left the USSR in 1928, he never adopted an anti-Soviet stance, as did his compatriots Rachmaninoff and Stravinsky.

Given his traditionalism, Glazunov's attraction to the saxophone in the last years of his life is all the more striking. It was a famous German saxophonist who urged the composer to use the instrument, although Glazunov died before he was able to hear a performance of his concerto. The concerto remains perhaps the classical work for saxophone that is most often performed today.

Steven Banks brought a modern sensibility to the work, emphasizing its jazzy rhythms and playing it at a slightly faster tempo than usual. The saxophone is especially prominent in this work for string orchestra, with its playful runs and many solo cadenza-like passages, and which ends with a great flourish.

Jacques Ibert was a generation younger than Glazunov, and that quarter century made a big difference in the musical influences he absorbed as he embarked on his own compositional career. The influence of jazz is unmistakable in the *Concertino*. Ibert was at ease and far more familiar with jazz than was Glazunov, who was nearly 70 when he composed his concerto. While that does not make Glazunov's work less appealing in its own way, a modern listener warms immediately to the excitement and verve that is palpable in Ibert's work.

The combination of instruments is important here. Flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn and trumpet lend tremendous color and variety to the score. The work, also less than 15 minutes in length, is in two movements. Amidst its fellow wind instruments, the saxophone soars and dominates everything, almost from the very opening measures.

Ibert had an intriguing life and career. One of his first

orchestral pieces, composed in 1920, was based on Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), written while Wilde was incarcerated. Ibert's music was banned by the pro-Nazi Vichy government in 1940 and he eventually moved to Switzerland for the duration of the war. He wrote scores for numerous films, including works directed by Julien Duvivier, G.W. Pabst, Maurice Tourneur and Marc Allégret. Most notably, he composed the music for Orson Welles' *Macbeth* (1948) and the "Circus" segment of Gene Kelly's *Invitation to a Dance* (1952).

Banks, the winner of the first prize at the 2019 Young Concert Artists International Audition, the first time a saxophonist had been accorded that honor, was an extraordinary performer in both works for saxophone on the program.

Considering the role of jazz in the July 23 program, the international background of its key participants was appropriate and significant. On the podium was Chinese-American conductor Xian Zhang, currently the highly regarded music director of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. As noted above, the composer of the opening work has a mixed South African-Japanese ancestry. The works for saxophone were composed by a Russian and a Frenchman. And the saxophone soloist, Steven Banks, is African American.

This program shows, in the opinion of this writer, how much more often the music of the first half of the 20th century should be performed. For important historical reasons, the promising trends of this period—including the clashes of different styles and approaches—were followed by a period of relative musical sterility after the Second World War. Classical music composition today suffers from many of the same maladies as in other spheres of cultural life, but the work of a century ago retains considerable value and interest today.



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