

Hearing saxophones: Saxophone schools in actual performance

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Aims

This paper aims to find links between the saxophone players's discourse about schools of performance and the actual performance. It is based on a research in progress in which I try to show the building of identities as the main issue when talking about schools of performance. Through the process of recording analysis, I will try to find out if the main features that classical saxophone players refer to as distinguishing between different schools of performance are actually heard in performance. The features that I will try to find were taken from the analysis of nine interviews that I have made to different internationally known saxophone players. Aspects like vibrato, timbre or phrasing will be analysed in the recordings.

Context and problem

This work in progress will hopefully lead to my PhD thesis on classical saxophone schools and the processes of identity. The process of identity building is a complex one, and it is, first of all, a narrative process, always changing and never closed. In this process, one finds the way to write a personal story which is made of permanent choices between the many aspects of his personal history and environment. Nevertheless, these choices are made of aspects taken from the actual, external world.

In a paper that I presented during *Performa '07*, I tried to put some evidence on the fact that talking about schools of performance is mainly about building identities and incorporating the school affair in the general personal identity narrative. In that paper I found some of the main features of identity as a process (taken from some of the most important theoretical literature on identity) in the analysis of nine interviews from selected saxophone players, with schools as the central subject. I found namely the features that show identity as a narrative process. The next step was to establish the necessary link between the narrative process and its roots in reality, following two ways: the historical and contextual background (which I intend to present in my thesis) and the actual performance. The interviews included general questions concerning both the interviewee and schools, and also some specific questions which tried to gather information about specific aspects of performance to distinguish between different schools. After further reading and analysing of the answers, I was able to establish which schools were named by the interviewee and which specific aspects of performance were referred to.

The named schools were the French school, the American / Nordic school and the Japanese / Asiatic school, with occasional references to the Rascher school and to national schools in various countries. The main distinguishing features were timbre and vibrato, with some of the interviewees naming aspects of phrasing and technique.

The French school was referred to as having a “compact”, “light” and “clear” sound, “with energy”, “speed of air”, “controlled”, and as being concerned with timbre research. The American school was referred to as having a “broad”, “floated”, “heavy”, “large”, “dark” and “open” sound. The Japanese school was named by its “beautiful”, “clean”, “soft” and “not aggressive” sound. As for vibrato, it was considered to be “too much” present in the three schools, with the Japanese school being referred to as “broad”. Nevertheless, several interviewees referred a change in the French school in what concerns vibrato. This change was associated with the generation born on the post-war period, and also with new repertoires. Repertory was also referred to as being a distinguishing feature, with some interviewees naming the French school as a conservative one and the American school as an avant-gardist one, while others considered it to be the opposite, and still others referring the post-war French school as being more avant-gardist than the American one, but not pre-war generations.

So I proposed to make an analysis of selected recordings from selected saxophone players, aiming to find any evidence of the distinguishing features referred to by the interviewees: looking for vibrato and timbre specificities and for other aspects that can distinguish saxophone players that are referred to as belonging to different schools.

Method

Because I am not so interested in establishing and classifying the world of classical saxophone in schools, but I am much more interested in looking at schools as part of the identity processes, always moving, and find its links with history, context and actual performance, I preferred not to select a large sample of recordings and performers to reach statistic conclusions within a broad inductive study. My general methodological approach to this subject of performance studies is one that is somewhere between anthropology's *Thick Description* and psychology's *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. Therefore, I preferred to make a significant selection of performers and recordings.

Performers were selected among those who, during the interviews, appear to be most significantly referred to as representing a certain school. The interviewee selection had itself already had this representative role in account, therefore I tried to include, whenever possible, the interviewees that are referred to, or that refer themselves to, as belonging to a certain school. The existence and availability of recordings was, obviously, strong criteria. I also used my own perception and knowledge, as a saxophone player, of the world of classical saxophone as a complementary criterion. I therefore selected five among the nine interviewees: Arno Bornkamp (Dutch saxophone player, referred to as belonging to the American / Nordic school), Claude Delangle, Jean-Yves Fourmeau and Jean-Marie Londeix (the three of them French, referred to and referring themselves to as belonging to the French school) and Eugene Rousseau (American, referred to as belonging to the American school or, in some literature [DRYER-BEERS 1998] to the French school). I added the French performer Marcel Mule, very often referred to as the founder of the French school, and the Japanese Nobuya Sugawa, referred to as representing the Japanese school. Because of Rousseau's double French school/American school reference (probably due to the fact that he studied with Marcel Mule), I selected the American performer Donald Sinta, who belongs to the same generation but is referred to only as belonging to the American school. Different generations of the French school were present (Londeix and Mule from two pre-war generations, Delangle and Fourmeau from the first post-war generation) to test the issue of change. To be safe, I also selected a younger, post-war American performer, Otis

Murphy (who studied with Rousseau and, like his teacher, also in France, but with Fourmeau).

The works recorded were selected among pieces both widespread and frequently referred to, both from the French repertory and the American one. The specifically Japanese repertory is very recent and not widespread, and Japanese players seem to play pieces from the French and American repertory (even if a thorough study of the repertory of different schools has not been made yet). I tried to select an American piece recorded also by French performers and a French piece recorded also by American performers. I therefore selected Jacques Ibert's *Concertino da Camera* and Paul Creston's *Sonata opus 19*. I selected and focused on a slow, lyrical piece (the slow part of Ibert's *Concertino* second movement) and a fast movement with varying articulations (the third movement of Creston's *Sonata*). Among the nine performers, six have recorded the two pieces. Delangle has only recorded Ibert's *Concertino*, while Londeix and Sinta have only recorded Creston's *Sonata*.

I first listened to both pieces to look for noticeable distinguishing features, first not taking in account what the interviewees had said, then looking for issues referred to by some of them, like phrasing, articulation or technique. In these first listening sessions I also looked for a general impression about tone quality and vibrato, which the interviewees seem to refer to as the most important distinguishing features. I therefore selected a reasonable sample of three different tones from each piece, among those which seemed to be the most demonstrative, especially in what concerns timbre.

Thereafter, I listened carefully to each sound, trying to grasp the specific qualities of each performer's timbre, before opening the samples (saved in AIFF format) with the software *Sonic Visualizer* [Queen Mary, University of London: 2005-2009]. Then I listened again to the whole selection of recordings, complementing it with the simultaneous reading of their spectrograms. After this, I began to analyse the spectrum of each of the selected sounds, looking for the relative strength of the following harmonics or groups of harmonics: fundamental, low (2nd to 5th) harmonics, medium (6th to 9th) harmonics and high (10th and higher) harmonics. I also looked for other noticeable features.

Then, I used the same sounds to analyse vibrato, according to the following items: kind (pitch or loudness vibrato), speed (in the scholarly used measure of number of cycles per minute divided by four), and wideness (in cents). Assuming, based on the first hearings, that vibrato in these recordings is, essentially, pitch vibrato with, in some cases, a bit of loudness vibrato, I didn't measure loudness variations. I also looked for the presence of vibrato throughout the pieces (permanent within all the notes except the very short ones or varying) and during the same note (permanent or varying).

Finally I heard all the recordings and samples again and compared the hearing with the results of the software analysis.

Conclusions

After having analysed the recordings selected, it seems to me that this sample and these analysis techniques proved to be useful to reach a series of conclusions, namely:

- That one can find evidence of the presence of some features that are referred to as distinguishing between different schools in actual performance;
- That these features include timbre, vibrato and phrasing;
- That the performers referred to as belonging to the American / Nordic school who were subject to this analysis tend to have a timbre with a strong fundamental, while those referred to as belonging to the French school tend

to have a more balanced relation between fundamental, low and medium harmonics;

- That there seems to be a change in the use vibrato between the pre-war born performers referred to as belonging to the French school and the post-war born ones, the former having a wide and permanent vibrato, the latter having a shorter and not permanently used vibrato;
- That the performers referred to as belonging to the American / Nordic school tend to have a vibrato that is closer in depth and speed to the one of the pre-war born performers referred to as belonging to the French school, while not permanent;
- That the performers referred to as belonging to the French school tend to have a more timbre-and-loudness sustained kind of phrasing;
- That the performer referred to as belonging to the Japanese school share features associated with the French and with the American / Nordic school, while slightly closer to the latter.

Nevertheless, there are some features referred to by the interviewees as distinguishing different schools that the recording analysis cannot confirm, namely:

- The perfect technical control associated with the French school: while noticeable most of the time with most of the performers referred to as belonging to the French school, it is not noticeable in all of them;
- The vibrato at 76 (number of cycles per minute divided by four) associated with the French school was not confirmed; in fact, its speed is quite variable.

Moreover, the timbral differences are not so clear in every sample. If, generally speaking, one can easily hear the timbral differences (even if they are clearer in some contexts than in others), these are not always seen in the spectra. This can be due to the well-known difference between our hearing perception and the machine's one. But it is also due to the very unstable character of the spectrum as a tool. This can be overcome with further work, by measuring and comparing all the harmonics one by one, within very short frames of time. Such a work could be useful to help finding the very subtle timbral differences one can hear. Nevertheless, most of the timbral differences noticed during the analysis that I have made are relatively clear in the more stable spectrograms.

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