AN OLD NEW WORLD CONCERTO FOR TENOR SAXOPHONE?
by David Poulter

1. At the time of writing the Fantasia for Soprano or Tenor Saxophone and Chamber Orchestra (1) by Heitor Villa-Lobos is not included in the Tenor Saxophone Index. There is a widely held view that the composition was written for soprano saxophone and should accordingly be performed on that instrument. This article contains evidence which suggests that a broader view should be taken and that tenor saxophone players should not be discouraged from studying this “wonderful work”(2).

2. The Fantasia was composed in 1948 by the Brazilian composer, Heitor Villa-Lobos for Marcel Mule, who was then Professor of Saxophone at the National Conservatory of Music in Paris. He was also a concert soloist, performing “almost exclusively on the alto and soprano saxophones”(3). By 1948 he had also led a saxophone quartet, playing soprano saxophone, for over twenty years, in what by then had become the Paris Saxophone Quartet. Mule never performed the work and it was not premiered until 1951. It was first recorded, by Eugene Rousseau, as late as 1971. Since then it has gained in popularity and is now probably one of the most widely known of all compositions for saxophone (of any size) and orchestra. John Harle recorded the Fantasia in 1990, and Theodore Kerkezos recorded it in 2002. These three recordings are probably the mostly widely known in the UK, as indicated by records of CDs held in the libraries of the main music colleges. All three were recordings of soprano saxophone and orchestra. A list of known recordings is given in Appendix One.

3. In 1984 Eugene Rousseau again recorded the Fantasia on soprano saxophone, but this time with a piano accompaniment played by Hans Graf. This version would have been of particular interest to music students, and especially their accompanists who need to grapple with a difficult piano reduction and undertake imaginative editing in order to make it playable. Notwithstanding the difficulties, several other recordings made with piano accompaniment have also been issued, whilst the YouTube website provides several examples of student performances, on tenor saxophone, with piano accompaniment and varying degrees of success. The duo Herman Wortmann and Hans-Martin Limberg may be singled out for having recorded a version for soprano saxophone with organ accompaniment, a format they have used for several other classics of the saxophone repertoire.

4. In 2001 Ray Smith, a pupil of Eugene Rousseau, and described by him as “one of the world’s outstanding woodwind artists”(4), became the first person to record the Fantasia on tenor saxophone. It is included on a CD which also featured Ray Smith playing soprano, alto and baritone saxophones. He was supported in the Fantasia by the Mountain West Studio Orchestra. The Fantasia has also been recorded on tenor saxophone by Detlef Bensmann. An accomplished YouTube recording of the Fantasia is currently available featuring the tenor saxophone playing of Andrey Buriakov, accompanied at the piano by Elena Grinevich.

5. Seven recordings, two with tenor saxophone, of the Fantasia were analysed with a view to identifying the relative suitability of the piece for tenor and soprano saxophones. One would expect the soprano to be the nimbler instrument. For each recording the Fantasia was divided into seven sections, using rehearsal points printed on the score, and each section was timed. With one exception, it was found that the tempi used in each section were remarkably similar, regardless of saxophone size or accompaniment. The exception was the last thirteen bars of the third movement, including the passage which invites experimentation with double-tonguing, which were taken at a markedly slower tempo by Ray Smith. I leave it to others to take a view on whether this diminishes the value of the performance. (For more detail see Appendix Two – Recorded Performance Timings.) To my ears, the phrasing of the music in these recordings was not adversely affected by performance on the larger instrument. Having said that, it is only fair to refer to Steven Mauk’s reservations about performance on the tenor, contained in his detailed essay “Villa-Lobos’ Fantasia for Soprano Saxophone”(5).
6. There is, of course, a striking difference between a performance of the Fantasia by saxophone and orchestra, and one with saxophone and piano. Since neither the soprano nor the tenor will blend with a piano as well as they do with an orchestra, it could be argued that the choice of saxophone is less significant when with piano accompaniment. Given that Villa-Lobos died a few years before the Fantasia score, with piano reduction, was published, it is not clear whether Villa-Lobos would have approved performance with piano accompaniment, or indeed whether he approved publication for “soprano or tenor saxophone”. As Steven Mauk suggests, this may have been the publisher’s decision.

7. The Fantasia received its premiere on 17th November 1951, with Villa-Lobos conducting a chamber orchestra at a concert held in Rio de Janeiro at the auditorium of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The soloist was Waldemar Szpilman. This information is included in Steven Mauk’s essay. However what Mauk fails to mention is that at this world premiere, Szpilman performed the Fantasia on a tenor saxophone. In his recently published book on the saxophone Stephen Cottrell states that Waldemar Szpilman, was a friend of Villa-Lobos and that he didn’t own a soprano saxophone. The piece was therefore played on the tenor instrument... Cottrell states that Villa-Lobos himself was an enthusiastic saxophone player who had included the saxophone in a variety of his orchestral and chamber compositions from as early as 1904, when Villa-Lobos was only aged seventeen. Of his twelve compositions for wind ensembles (excluding works for large bands) six included parts for saxophone. All were for alto saxophone, perhaps reflecting Villa-Lobos’ affinity with contemporary French music. Prior to the premiere, Szpilman requested that the composition be transposed down a tone, to avoid too frequent use of an altissimo G. The transposition brought the Fantasia within the “normal” range of both soprano and tenor saxophones, without the need for altissimo notes. The new key was accepted by Villa-Lobos and retained in the published score.

8. The original choice of key is perplexing; a feeling which may have been shared by Marcel Mule, on receiving the manuscript. In his conversation with Eugene Rousseau, Mule was perhaps being tactful in limiting his comments to the sentence “Somehow the piece didn’t excite me at the time.” According to Mark Morris Villa-Lobos was one of the most prodigious composers of the Twentieth Century, producing around 2,000 compositions and arrangements. Inevitably his music is uneven.... Arriving at his music is like arriving in a new country; totally new colours and a bewildering array of new experiences.

In the words of Steven Mauk “… the Fantasia may have been finished without the advice of a knowledgeable classical saxophonist…. Had Mule performed the work, it is likely that he would have suggested some alterations to the piece to make it more readily accessible.” Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians states that Villa-Lobos “defined the exuberant stylistic eclecticism that has continued to characterise Brazilian art music.” He may perhaps be forgiven for his lack of attention to detail, such as choice of key, tempi instructions and even the instrument he was writing for. Mauk and Fratangelli have provided interesting analysis of such problems, which are also addressed in Appendix Three below. In considering the constraints to performing the Fantasia on tenor saxophone, it should be recognised that most such constraints, also apply to performance on the soprano saxophone.

9. Both tenor and soprano saxophones have much smaller classical repertoires than the alto saxophone, with its rich heritage, particularly from France. This should not be used as a reason to become too defensive of repertoire for one or the other instrument. Transcriptions will always be a part of the saxophone repertoire. Now we have electric pianos and synthesisers which transcribe at the touch of a button there is even more scope for experimenting in this field. And perhaps more tenor and soprano players should add to the annoyance of flautists by playing Debussy’s Syrinx more often!

10. The academic musical establishment in the United Kingdom has been very slow to recognise the value of saxophones to classical music. There is no entry for Waldemar Szpilman in Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians. This may not be surprising but of greater concern is that there are no entries for John Harle or even Marcel Mule, to name but two. It is some consolation to saxophone enthusiasts to find that an article on Sidney Bechet is included. Incidentally, Bechet was playing his soprano saxophone in Paris at times when Villa-Lobos was also in Paris. Given the latter’s interest in popular music it would be intriguing to discover whether Bechet influenced Villa-Lobos’ thoughts on saxophones, or for that matter...
Mule’s! Stanley Myers, who, in 1992, composed a soprano saxophone concerto for John Harle, expressed the view that Sidney Bechet was “the first great master” of the soprano saxophone. (13) To return to UK neglect of the classical saxophone, this is also reflected in the neglect in respect of examinations in performance on saxophone, although this has been largely remedied in recent years. This has a particular bearing on the choice of saxophone size when studying or performing the Fantasia.

11. The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music only began examining performance on saxophone in 1985. The first Syllabus of exam pieces, compiled by the eminent saxophonist and composer, James Rae, was for the period 1985-1989 and applied only to alto and tenor saxophone performance at grades Three to Eight. Movements from the Fantasia were not included during this period. A new syllabus for 1990 to 1995 extended examinations to performance at grades One to Eight on soprano and baritone, as well as alto and tenor, saxophones. A feature of the syllabus, which largely remains today, is that all pieces identified for alto or tenor are deemed to be suitable, respectively, for baritone or soprano. Some pieces are drawn from albums named for alto or tenor saxophone. A few specify the size of saxophone in the title. Many pieces are transcriptions from music written for other instruments. Given this background it is not surprising to find the First Movement of the “Fantasia for Soprano or Tenor Saxophone” identified as a Grade Eight piece for “Soprano and Tenor Saxophone in B flat”. The revised syllabus for 1996 to 2001 retained the First Movement as a Grade Eight piece and added the Second Movement as a Grade Seven piece. Both movements have been retained in all subsequent revisions of the syllabus. The whole of the Fantasia is identified as a suitable work to perform for examination at LRSM level on either tenor or soprano saxophone.

12. Other examining bodies, including Trinity Laban College of Music, London College of Music and the Vienna Music Examinations Board, also include movements from the Fantasia as examination subjects for tenor saxophone. The first movement is listed as a suitable audition piece for the tenor saxophone prior to studying at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. (NB No repertoire is suggested for auditioning on soprano saxophone.)

13. The Associated Board has recently (July 2013) published a new exam syllabus for woodwind instruments for the period 2014-17. This retains the inclusion of the first two movements of the Fantasia, as in earlier syllabuses. The second movement is in List B of the Grade Seven syllabus. It is one of four pieces retained from the 2010-13 syllabus. The number of pieces in List B has increased from seven to nine. The first movement is in List B of the Grade Eight syllabus and is, again, one of four pieces retained from the 2010-13 syllabus, in a list which has increased from seven to ten pieces.

14. CONCLUSIONS Performance of the Fantasia gives rise to very many difficulties. Even world-class saxophonists will not often get the chance to perform it with an orchestra, although Branford Marsalis has had a remarkable run of performances during his 2008 Marsalis Brasilianos tour. (14) Performance with piano accompaniment has limited appeal but is important to students. However the Fantasia has been the subject of many accomplished recordings, and it has many beautiful and original melodies and arpeggios which lend themselves to inspiring individual study. There’s no need for this opportunity to be limited to soprano players when performance on the tenor saxophone has been so ably demonstrated by Ray Smith and Andrey Buriakov.

15. Villa-Lobos was undoubtedly a great composer, and his Fantasia a great composition. The tenor saxophone is a great musical instrument (15). However Shakespeare’s advice seems apposite, namely that “madness in great ones should not unwatched go”(16). A thought echoed by the great Duke Ellington in Part Ten of his 1957 orchestral suite Such Sweet Thunder. Or perhaps it is more tactful to suggest that Villa-Lobos was a rough diamond who composed another rough diamond called Fantasia for Soprano or Tenor Saxophone and Chamber Orchestra. This diamond is not much less rough for being performed on the one instrument than the other.
Notes:

(1) The title is that given by the publisher to the version for saxophone and piano, published in 1963 and although Villa-Lobos gave his 1948 manuscript the title Fantasia for Soprano Saxophone and Orchestra the subsequent score was entitle Fantasia for Saxophone and Small Orchestra.

(2) Paul Harvey's view, see p 78 of his Yehudi Menuhin Music Guide to the Saxophone (London 1995). He also states that "if it were for alto instead of soprano, it would be one of the 'classics'. Personally, I like it better than any of the 'big three' alto works". Paul Harvey was founder and leader, on soprano saxophone, of the London Saxophone Quartet, as well as Senior Professor at the Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall in London.

(3) Marcel Mule: His Life and the Saxophone by Eugene Rousseau (Second Edition) (Minnesota 2012)

(4) From the notes with the CD Tableaux de Provence, featuring Ray Smith, Tantara 2001.

(5) Steven Mauk is Professor of Performance Studies at Ithaca College, New York, an Honorary Life Members of the North American Saxophone Alliance, and a member of the World Tenor Saxophone Consortium. In his detailed essay on the Fantasia, which may be found at http://faculty.ithaca.edu/mauk/docs/villalobos.pdf he expresses the view that "...the piece loses much of its charm and delicacy when played on the tenor saxophone..." and "... wonders if Villa-Lobos ever truly envisioned this work for tenor saxophone.

(6) Waldemar Szpilman was a Polish violinist, clarinettist and saxophonist who emigrated to Brazil in 1925. He played with the Brasiliana Symphony Orchestra and by 1959 was leading his own orchestra. He was a cousin of Wladyslaw Szpilman, the pianist and composer who was the principal character in Roman Polanski's 2002 film The Pianist. His son Marcos founded the Rio Jazz Orchestra.

(7) See p 241 of The Saxophone by Stephen Cottrell (London 2012). Stephen Cottrell is Professor of Music at City University London.


(9) Twentieth Century Composers by Mark Morris (London 1996)


(11) Amanda Fratangeli, Ball State University, Indiana. Her essay may be found at http://cardinals.scholar.bsu.edu/bitstream/123456789/196174/1/FratangeliA_2012-3_BODY.pdf


(13) Programme notes for the first performance of Stanley Myer's Concerto for Soprano Saxophone, quoted in the sleeve notes to the CD "Sax Drive" (Argo D 102264)

(14) www.villalobos.ca/calendar-works

(15) Greatness, as measured by expressiveness, versatility, and it's adoption by some the greatest jazz improvisers.

(16) Hamlet: Act Three, Scene One. Although not what Shakespeare had in mind, any madness associated with Villa-Lobos was probably of the variety defined by the Chambers Dictionary (Edinburgh 1998) as extravagant playfulness or exuberance.

Appendices:

Appendix One: Recordings

Internet sources, especially the Heitor Villa-Lobos website www.villalobos.ca, indicate that the Fantasia has been recorded by the following saxophonists (date of recording where known is shown in brackets):-


The recordings by Ray Smith and Detlef Bensmann featured the tenor saxophone. Recordings by Paulo Moura (1983) Eugene Rousseau (1984), Paquito D'Rivera and Christopher Cleviston were with piano accompaniment. Six of these recordings were analysed for tempi and style. In addition a YouTube recording made in 2002 by Andrey Buriaikov performing on tenor saxophone with piano accompaniment was similarly analysed. See Appendix Two below.
Appendix Two: Recorded Performance Timings

The table below shows variations in timings of different parts of the Fantasia recorded by seven performers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performer</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>1st 0-5</th>
<th>1st 5-9</th>
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<th>3rd 0-10</th>
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<tr>
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<td>SS &amp; Orch.</td>
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<td>61</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eugene Rousseau</td>
<td>SS &amp; Pno.</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>66</td>
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<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Harle</td>
<td>SS &amp; Orch.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ray Smith</td>
<td>TS &amp; Orch.</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theodore Kerkezos</td>
<td>SS &amp; Orch.</td>
<td>105</td>
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<td>54</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>149</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andrey Buriakov</td>
<td>TS &amp; Pno.</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>157</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keith Young</td>
<td>SS &amp; Pno.</td>
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Notes:

1. The first movement is split into four sections, indicated by rehearsal points shown on the score.
2. The second movement is not split into sections, and the third is split into two, to highlight the animated ending.
3. The score figures are the tempi suggested at the beginning of each movement. The figure for the first movement was shown by Villa-Lobos in his 1948 manuscript and subsequent score in the lowered key.
4. Tempi are given in minims per minute for the first movement and crotchets per minute for the second and third.
5. Timings for Andrey Buriakov should be treated with caution owing to poor recording quality.

Appendix Three: Performance notes

I recommend that reference be made to Steven Mauk’s essay on the Fantasia (1) and Amanda Fratangelli’s essay “Investigation of Score Omissions and Conflicting Performance Decisions Pertaining to Heitor Villa-Lobos’ Fantasia for Soprano Saxophone and Chamber Orchestra” (11). I add a few notes of my own which may provide comfort to the cautious tenor player, particularly if selecting exam pieces.

Tempi:

Students of the Fantasia are advised to listen to at least one recording by a major saxophonist, since a strict interpretation of the score following indicated metronome markings would be virtually impossible, as well as unmusical.

The score indicates tempi in a mixture of French and Italian (other scores by Villa-Lobos mixed French and Portuguese!) with metronome marks, in brackets, only at the beginning of each of the three movements. None of the recordings analysed opened the Fantasia as fast as the given metronome speed. At Section Five, marking the entry of the thirteen-bar song-like melody is headed “Moins” (i.e. “less”). Eugene Rousseau reduced his speed here by about 60%, a practice which was followed by the later performers. All performers maintain the generally slower tempo both during quaver and triplet-quaver melodies and during the restatement of the song-like melody. The Second Movement is generally recorded at slightly slower tempo than the indicated metronome mark. The opening direction of “Lent” (i.e. “slow”) is followed by the instruction at Section Two, at the first entry of the saxophone, to play “Lentement” (i.e. “slowly”). Perhaps this is intended to counter any undue excitement generated during the preceding bars of semi-quavers! The Third Movement is headed “Tres Animé (i.e. “very animated”). The only other significant change of tempo indicated is to play presto during the last three bars. Recorded performances were slower than the metronome mark, though all displayed dazzling runs of semiquavers in this movement, as in the First Movement.

Wrong Notes:

In the First Movement there is a wrong note in the third bar of Section Eight. The b flat should be a g. Other wrong notes occur in the piano reduction, referred to in Amanda Fratangelli’s essay.
Appendix Four: Further Reading

Recommended further reading includes two references cited in the notes above namely Steven Mauk’s essay on the Fantasia (5) and Investigation of Score Omissions and Conflicting Performance Decisions pertaining to Heitor Villa-Lobos’ Fantasia for Soprano saxophone and Chamber Orchestra by Amanda Fratangelli, Ball State University, Indiana (11). In addition one work, which is likely to be of interest, to which the writer has not had access, is Roland Davis Dowdy’s 2007 thesis for Northwestern University: The saxophone music of Heitor Villa-Lobos: the restoration of the Fantasia and the discovery of A roseira. See also Brazilian Music for Saxophone: A Survey of Solo and Small Chamber Works by Paula J. Van Regenmorter 2009 University of Maryland [link]

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