

Musical boundaries

An opinion into the standing of the classical saxophone in today's musical world.

Musical genres, classifications, styles, boundaries or whatever you want to call it is something of an annoyance to me in a general sense, and especially in a saxophonic sense!

To me musical classifications often build barriers to what should be an all encompassing approach and experience whether it's performing or composing. Music is the art of combining sounds (instrumental, vocal or both) to produce beauty in form, harmony, and expression to create an emotional reaction. Being able to incorporate influences from any forms of music, art or life is a really important factor and helps to inform us and develop both musically and individually.

Saxophonic boundaries:

With the instrument's versatility I find that those of a more traditional musical sensibility sometimes just don't know how to take us and our instrument. Despite its origins, the saxophone's classical roots and public perception within the classical world is lacking compared to established concert instruments.

Something we must remember and point out to others is that the sax is still just a baby having only been in existence for approximately 160 years. This can be both a positive and negative thing.

Compared to other established instruments we are lucky that the sax has the opportunity to evolve in such a diverse point in time where it is so easy to share everything and anything at a click of a button. We don't have that entrenched tradition that the older established instruments have which could bring about certain expectations and restrictions on the music we play and in the way we play it.

I'll try and give a short example.

Final recitals at the RNCM channels students work throughout the year(s) into a final showcase. In the saxophone department you are encouraged to seek out, explore and develop your own individual voice. This results in perhaps the most varied and creative selection of music on show with each recital being completely different and unique from the other.

I've seen someone play bass saxophone and voice with multiple microphone positioning techniques to create alternative sound effects. People play with tape/cd varying from simple repeated chords, multi layered sax parts to repeated rhythmic expletives! Saxophone with double piano or with string orchestra to full orchestra, with organ or percussion, the list goes on and on. This may also, and often does include improvisation in a jazz sense and sometimes in the free idiom. All rather exciting and creative!



On the flip side there is so much expectation and restrictions on the correct and proper repertoire for the pianists that the thought of playing anything that doesn't include an early traditional sonata, the odd prelude, and a set of theme and variations wouldn't bare thinking about. Basically don't rock the boat, it's solo piano only! Sounds rather lonely to me.

To me they miss out on opportunities to play some great works such as the Janacek Concertino for piano and chamber ensemble (1925) or Capriccio for piano and wind ensemble (1926). Bartok's Seven Pieces from Mikrokosmos (two pianos) or Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, the list goes on. These pieces have the piano as its central focus and to me are just as impressive as solo piano works, as they highlight the ability of the player as both a soloist and chamber musician all the same time.

Musical development:

What's important is the freedom that is and must be given to these young musicians, highlighted by the sheer variety of rep and music demonstrated by the saxophone department due to their lack of fear to tear down these musical boundaries to create what is just great music.

Perhaps the situation at the RNCM is rather more unique one as it is one of the few music colleges left in the UK that does not run a separate Jazz degree. Instead students are encouraged to take part and learn from experienced top class jazz musicians and tutors such as Julian Arguelles and Tim Garland (saxophone), Jiggs Whigham (Trombone), Steve Berry (Bass) and Dave Hassell (Percussion) alongside their classical training. This in my view helps to take a certain exclusivity away between the 'genres' and fear from those without much, or any experience to get involved.

These other musical experiences help to inform and develop us into better rounded musicians. In my case I was introduced to free improv whilst at Leeds College of Music during my classical undergrad by the amazing double bass player Dave Kane. This taught me to 'really' listen to myself, my instrument and especially to others, and how to interact with them. I think this really helped to develop my core sound and tone and my musicality. As Jim said in his interview, developing processes to help you understand your playing and to really get inside the music you play or listen to is key to a great performance!

Instrumental influences:

In my experience going to masterclasses that are not saxophone based can often be far more useful! I don't mean that sax masterclasses were boring or unhelpful. I just found that because everyone knew so much about the instrument already that we'd get only get to cover really small or technical aspects of the instrument.

Now going to a piano masterclass, that was a totally different story!

Think about it, how does a pianist create dynamics, emotions, phrasing and such an individual sound on what is essentially a percussion instrument? Add to this the fact they don't even get to practice on the same piano as they perform on, the quality and type of the instrument differs constantly, what a nightmare! We've got nothing to complain about, we get to choose and change our instrument, mouthpiece, reeds and ligature from hundreds of different makes and models which we can take away with us and practice on and perfect.

Listening to and incorporating these other understandings and approaches from different instrumentalists and genres is always very interesting and informative and should be encouraged whichever instrument you play.

Growing influences into the compositional world:



There are the odd examples of saxophone being used in the wider classical orchestral world such as Ravel with his Bolero and the 9th Symphony by Vaughan Williams, but they have been scarce.

Fortunately these boundaries are slowly being bridged by a growing number of modern composers with great benefit to the saxophonist. Something that must be encouraged as much as possible as there is still much to do.

Composers such as Mark-Anonthy Turnage, Graham Fitkin, Andy Scott and Louis Andriessen incorporate influences

from other genres from Jazz, Pop to Rock into their writing resulting in new and exciting works with the saxophone either as the focus or often as the key linchpin within the woodwinds.

Perhaps the prolific output by Turnage best demonstrates what this whole ramble has been about. He is able to draw influence from so many different sources in his writing.

From the art world Francis Bacon's Pope Innocent X and Blood on the Floor inspired 'Three Screaming Popes' and the multi movement wild sonic ride that is 'Blood on Floor'. Rooted in the classical tradition both are brimming with jazz influences including multiple sax parts in both to some incredible features in the later.



From other musical genres 'Hammered Out' is based around the main riff from Beyonce's chart hit 'Single Ladies'. 'Kai' for solo cello and ensemble directly quotes Charlie Parker's bebop tune Donna Lee. All include multiple sax parts highlighting his obvious passion for the instrument.

This has resulted in a number of brilliant saxophone pieces now part of our core repertoire such as 'Two Elegies Framing a Shout' and 'Sarabande', to the soprano concerto 'Your Rockaby'. Finally bringing us back to the concerto for tenor saxophone with 'A Man Descending' written for Joe Lovano. Despite its dedication the whole piece is actually written down with optional free improv sections. The question to why more modern classical composers don't write for saxophone more often or regularly in a solo, ensemble or orchestral context is an important one and is something I hope to explore in further posts and interviews as time goes on.

So to round up, that's if I can!

Saxophonists should be proud of our willingness and versatility to explore new music, take influence and generally mix it up with other genres, arts and personal experiences combining it into what is essentially just great music.

Our main task now should be to unashamedly and proudly promote ourselves as an established classical instrument, comfortable within ourselves and to be held up as equals to all other concert instruments gaining further acceptance within the classical realm & beyond, presenting our new and exciting, varied and boundless repertoire.

By Matt London

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