



# DARIUS MILHAUD'S BRAZILIAN CONNECTION

Nicole Paiement, conductor

Saturday, February 28, 2009 8:00 pm

A celebration of the Concert Hall naming follows.



## PROGRAM

*Cantate pour l'inauguration du musée de l'homme*, OP. 164 (1937)

Patrice Maginnis, soprano

Wendy Hillhouse, mezzo

Brian Staufenbiel, tenor

Robert Stafford, baritone

Jacinthe Harbec, narrator

Chorus directed by Elizabeth Eshleman and Kristin Pankonin

*Cinq études*, OP. 63 (1920)

Robert Schwartz, piano

*Concerto pour percussion*, OP. 109 (1929–30)

William Winant, percussion

## INTERMISSION

*Carnival d'aix*, OP. 83B (1926)

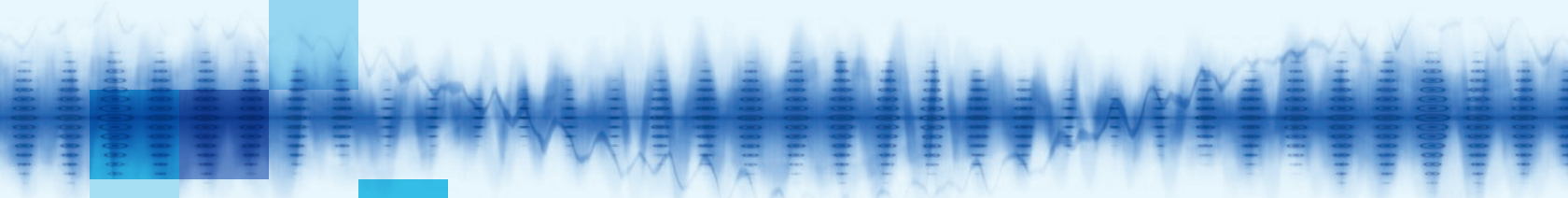
Julie Steinberg, piano

*Le boeuf sur le toit*, OP. 58 (1919)

Darius Milhaud (1892–1974) arrived at Mills College in 1940, fleeing Nazi persecution and grateful for the invitation extended to him by President Aurelia Henry Reinhardt. At the time, Mills had already secured a fine reputation in the arts and humanities. John Cage, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison had taught and performed at Mills, and both the Pro Arte and the Budapest String Quartets had residencies here.

The arrival of Milhaud brought a new international perspective to music at Mills. But—like Cage, Cowell, and Harrison—Milhaud was a musical maverick. In the '20s, Erik Satie had proclaimed that Milhaud was “a new spirit in French music,” whose compositions had “a more progressive modern sensibility based on spontaneity, fantasy, and audacity.” Milhaud’s compositions during this period anticipated later developments in 20th-century music. He experimented with indeterminacy and noise and, in 1920, joined Satie in the premiere of the latter’s *Musique d’ameublement*, or furniture music, designed to be ignored by its audience. This proved to be prescient—a direct precursor not only of John Cage’s ideas concerning the unnecessary distinction between music and environmental sound, but also the influential ambient music proposed by Brian Eno some 50 years later. Milhaud also looked beyond traditional stylistic distinctions between so-called “serious” and “popular” music, integrating the sounds of the café and the salon into his works, and drawing from cross-cultural sources such as Latin American music and jazz.

Darius Milhaud’s Brazilian connection dates back to February 1917, when he arrived in Rio de Janeiro to work in the diplomatic entourage of his friend, the poet Paul Claudel, who was serving as the French ambassador to Brazil. Inspired by the country’s tropical landscape and rich culture, Milhaud was particularly intrigued by the rhythm of Brazilian popular music, and the elusive, mournful, and liquid way Brazilian performers played this music, which gave him deeper insight into the Brazilian soul.



Milhaud's sojourn in Brazil lasted until November 1918. When he returned to Paris, memories of World War I were beginning to fade. A new optimism took root, based on the hope that another global catastrophe would never happen again. It was in this atmosphere that Milhaud, inspired by the Brazilian music in which he had been immersed, composed the score for a ballet, the surrealist fantasy *Le boeuf sur le toit*, Op. 58 with the subtitle: *The Nothing Happens Bar*.

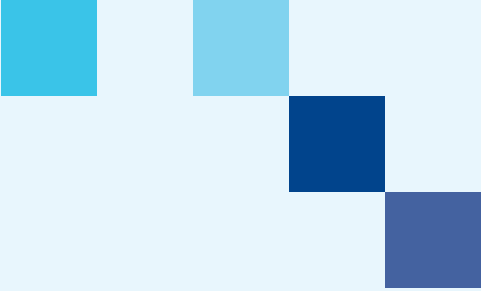
*Le boeuf sur le toit* (1919) was originally intended as music for one of Charlie Chaplin's silent films. Jean Cocteau convinced Milhaud to use the score for a ballet and wrote the scenario, a pantomime performed in slow motion by acrobats and clowns in an American bar during Prohibition. A policeman walks into a bar where the patrons are sipping cocktails. The bar instantaneously becomes a "milk-bar" and the policeman is decapitated by an overhead fan (only to be revived at the end of the ballet). The French Fauvist painter Raoul Dufy created the scenery. Milhaud's music, which consists of popular Brazilian melodies and his own theme embellished by hints of polytonality (the superimposition of chords and melodies in different keys), is in rondo form and traverses keys on every pitch of the chromatic scale.

*Le boeuf sur le toit* became one of the composer's best-received works—in January 1922, a restaurant/bar named after the ballet opened in Paris and quickly became a popular meeting place for both artists and members of high society. But the reception of Milhaud's music was not always favorable; sometimes his compositions provoked violent responses.

This was the case with his *Cinq études, Op. 63* (1920). Its premiere performance in 1921 by pianist Marcelle Meyer resulted in a near riot, and during the performance a policeman was summoned to sit by the composer in the event that things got out of hand. Milhaud was not discouraged by such hostile reactions. "It is indifference in the public that is depressing," he explained. "Enthusiasm or vehement protests prove that your work is alive."

Milhaud once remarked that while he gazed up into the nighttime sky he "would feel rays and tremors converging on me from all points in the sky and from below the ground simultaneous musics rushing towards me from all directions." He expressed this ideal of simultaneity in his music with both polytonality and a contrapuntal style with highly independent part writing. *Cinq études* is a technically advanced virtuosic work that uses these techniques. The opening movement features the piano as an obbligato instrument within a rich texture that at times consists of thematic material in three simultaneous keys. The bitonal second étude contains a variety of cross rhythms between the piano and orchestral parts. The third étude, a miniature tour de force, consists of four fugues, each in a different key. The 41-measure fourth étude is yet another example of Milhaud's forward-looking compositional wizardry. The movement is a palindrome; the dense polyphony of the first 20 measures is repeated in retrograde beginning with measure twenty-one. The final étude features the piano playing a syncopated theme with a descending chromatic line surrounded by counterpoint in the orchestra. About halfway through this stunningly virtuosic short movement, the tempo decreases and the texture becomes a cloud of polytonal harmony (in the strings), anticipating similar "sound masses" in works by Ligeti and Xenakis composed 40 years later.

Written in a much less serious vein, *Carnival d'aix, Op. 83b* (1926) is a humorous fantasy for piano and orchestra, which, like *Le boeuf sur le toit*, invokes the spirit of popular music. Named after Milhaud's beloved birthplace of Aix en Provence, *Carnival d'aix* is a setting of music from Milhaud's ballet entitled *Salade*, Op. 83 (1924). Like the ballet, its 12 movements invoke the *commedia dell'arte*. Very much in the spirit of the new sensibility championed by Milhaud and his fellow members of



Les Six (Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre, Arthur Honegger, Georges Auric, and Louis Durey), the exuberant, lighthearted score—with its diatonic harmony and clarity of form—avoids overwrought emotionalism and studied profundity at all costs.

But perhaps most striking is the extent to which *Carnival d'aix* invokes the spirit of Aix en Provence—allowing listeners to become aware of the region's special magic—which, as Milhaud's biographer Paul Collaer eloquently stated,

*is both wild and orderly, like the landscape of Tuscany, but more glowing. . . . Though Aix may be a symphony composed to the glory of the sun, there is also, beneath its plane trees, the deepest possible shade. . . . The splashing water from mossy fountains located at every street corner murmurs unceasingly. As shadow complements the brilliance of sunlight, so water satisfies this thirsty earth: where can this special equilibrium, this balance of contrasting passion, be better observed? (Translated by Jane Hohfeld Galante)*

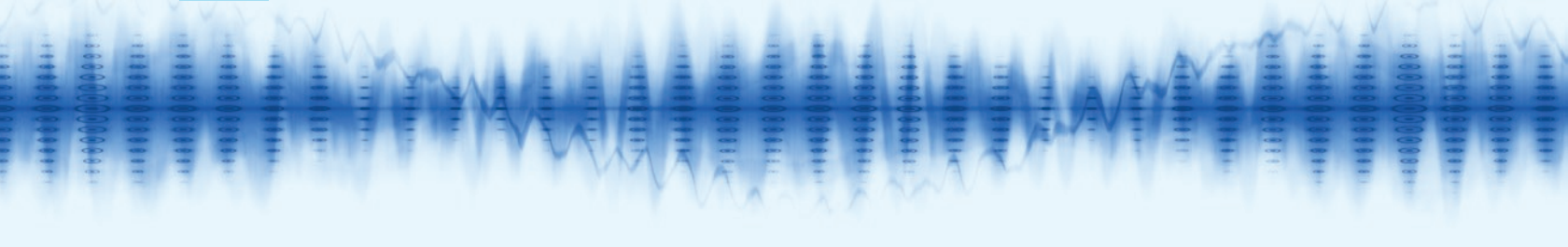

Both Darius and his wife Madeleine Milhaud certainly sensed the irony behind the celebrations of human achievement during the highly successful 1937 World's Fair in Paris. As Milhaud recounted in his autobiography:

*The mutter of sinister threats and portents was already to be heard. There was to be an Austrian pavilion, but the evil forces of the Anschluss were never far away. Picasso's Guernica adorned the walls of the Spanish pavilion, but the Republic had been murdered. Opposite one another, the German and Soviet pavilions seemed to challenge one another to mortal combat. One evening as we watched the sun set above the Pont d'Iéna, Madeleine clutched my arm in anguish and whispered, "This is the end of Europe!"*

Milhaud composed the [Cantate pour l'inauguration du musée de l'homme, Op. 164](#) (1937) for the dedication of the Museum of Man, which opened in 1937 during the World's Fair, whose mission was to explore human identity across history and cultural boundaries. The text for the *Cantate* was written by the poet Robert Desnos. Nathaniel Berman at the University of California, Santa Cruz, writes:

*Desnos was a leading figure in literary Surrealism in the 1920s, a pioneer of the technique of "automatic writing." By the mid 1930s, he had distanced himself from the mainstream Surrealist movement; but even in the fairly linear narrative of Cantate pour l'inauguration du musée de l'homme, some elements of the earlier style remain, particularly in the obsessive repetition of certain words and phrases and the poem's slideshow successions of visual images.*

*In the Cantate, Desnos and Milhaud set out to explore in music and language the central question of the Museum of Man: What is humanity? Where has it come from, and what is it becoming? The Cantate depicted human history as a progression from its primitive animalistic beginnings to a modernity marked equally by ingenious endeavor and frightening misstep.*



*The Cantate begins with primordial chaos; the explosion of a single pitch brings about the outburst of a violent choral chord, and the world comes into being. In the second movement, the voice of the narrator gives us a tour of the young earth. The third movement introduces us to humanity for the first time.*

*In the fourth and fifth movements, the human race progresses from infancy to childhood. In the sixth and seventh movements, childhood gives way to adolescence. Milhaud calls for recitation again in movement eight, this time in absolute unison as the human voices call for submission, and for the first time in the piece the call is directed at other humans. Clearly a reference to war and political repression, Milhaud and Desnos did not have far to look in 1938 for the inspiration for this movement, and taken together with the seventh movement, Desnos' text was eerily prophetic. Desnos remained in Paris during the occupation and, after repeatedly writing critically about the Nazi party, was arrested and sent to various concentration camps, where he contracted typhoid fever, which ultimately killed him.*

*The hushed pensiveness of the end of the ninth movement gives way to celebration in the tenth, as both music and text depict a happy coexistence with the earth and each other. There is an insidious note of doubt, though, in the words and music of this movement. The extreme high tessitura of the vocal lines gives a slight edge of nervousness to a melody which, significantly, has the jingly quality of a child's song; taken together with the expression of desire to "wash away our nightmare," it seems that the voice of the child from the earlier movements has returned, eager to forget its hard lessons and move on. Could Milhaud have intended a dark musical joke by setting this movement in A major, a key which seems to demand a "resolution" back to the D minor which defined the first part of the piece? It seems a fitting match for the irony in Desnos' final few lines of Cantate.*

Milhaud composed percussion music decades before the famous percussion music concerts presented at Mills College by John Cage in the late '30s and early '40s. The following is a program note Milhaud wrote for his *Concerto pour percussion, Op. 109* (1929-30).

*I have always been interested in percussion. In Les choéphores (1915-16) and in L'homme et son désir (1918) I used massive percussion. Is it the research that Berlioz did in that direction? Maybe!*

*The Concerto pour percussion (1929-30) consists of two parts connected together. It is a dramatic work. In view of the fact that when I composed it (between 1929 and 1930) jazz was enjoying a decisive influence on musical composition, I wanted to avoid at any cost that anyone might think it that kind of work, and so I stressed the rough and dramatic part of the piece. . . . I had already paid my tribute to jazz . . . in La création du monde (1923).*

*The Mills College Music Department is especially grateful to Mrs. Katharine Warne '45 and the Mills College Class of 1945 for establishing the Darius Milhaud Performance Endowments.*