

Alojzy Thomys' *Miniatures in Various Styles for Alto Saxophone and Piano*
Analysis by Brian Kauth

The present article deviates from my previous entries in that the work under discussion is not “new” in terms of its date of composition, but rather, “new” in terms of its familiarity to saxophonists today. Polish composer Alojzy Thomys (1929-2005) is not a composer that immediately comes to mind when we think of the saxophone; however, he has contributed an interesting and enjoyable work for the instrument with his *Miniatures in Various Styles for Alto Saxophone and Piano* (1968).

Thomys (himself a saxophonist) created a set of ten miniatures that are equally suitable for the concert stage as they are for study material. He notes in the preface to the score: “The present volume aims to introduce the performer to the sound world of twentieth-century music (impressionism, dodecaphony, jazz) through the use of the various techniques or compositional devices characteristic of its style.”¹

The movements are progressive in nature, beginning relatively simply, and gradually becoming more compositionally complex and musically/technically difficult. Rather than moving progressively throughout the work, I have decided to group my analysis of these miniatures according to the prevalent stylistic traits found in them.

Three of the miniatures (Nos. I, II, and IV) display jazz elements, ranging from chord vamps in the piano, to glissandi in the saxophone part. Miniature No. I features a rhythmic vamp in the piano, consisting of alternating quartal harmonies. Occasionally, Thomys switches to traditional jazz harmonies containing sevenths and ninths. The saxophone’s solo line sounds almost improvisatory above these chords. The saxophone’s simple melodic gestures in Miniature No. II are supported by a rhythmic/harmonic vamp in the piano that is reminiscent of the first miniature, albeit at a slower tempo. The most interesting “jazz” miniature is Miniature No. IV, which possesses a slightly impressionistic sound, due to the piano’s persistent parallel motion chords. The pungent tritone intervals found in these chords, as well as the half-note duplets played by the pianist’s left hand, create an unsettled rhythmic/harmonic texture, over which the saxophonist plays an improvisatory-style melody.

Miniatures Nos. III, V, and VII, are clearly based on neoclassical models, a march, scherzo, and a Bartókian character piece, respectively. The saxophone’s dotted eighth-note/sixteenth-note rhythms complement the march’s eighth-note pulse found in the piano in No. III. The scherzo of No. V follows the traditional ABA form, with a softer, slightly slower trio section from mm. 33-61. Several interval qualities are presented in No. VII (major seconds, tritones, major thirds) which create a sense of instability that propels the movement forward.

Miniature No. VI is heavily influenced by Stravinsky’s music, including the unusual placement of accents to create highly syncopated figures (similar to *The Rite of Spring*). These accented chords, like many others found throughout the work, lean heavily on the tritone for their harmonic instability and persistent sense of forward motion. The saxophone’s melodic writing is based on the octatonic scale, another feature of Stravinsky’s music that has also made its way into modern jazz.

Miniature No. VIII begins with a saxophone cadenza before a gentle eighth-note pulse begins in the piano. Once again, Thomys favors the tritone as a method of adding tension to the music. The music has a slightly impressionistic sound, similar to that associated with the music of Maurice Ravel. Cascading sixteenth-notes in the piano transition to thick, lush-sounding chords leading into the saxophonist’s second cadenza. The movement ends with a somber restatement of the piano’s initial eighth-note pulse.

Miniature No. IX commences with a five-note motif in the piano (C-D-Eb-F-F# in concert pitch) which is then re-stated by the saxophone. A scherzo-like accompaniment supports the saxophone’s expanded statements of the original motif. Following a short Baroque-influenced pedal point passage, the five-note motif is re-stated by the saxophonist, prior to descending chromatically downward to the saxophone’s low D# and the final upward flourish of the movement.

The final miniature (No. X) provides the most challenging music of the entire piece. Thomys utilizes a twelve-tone row (E-F-Ab-G-Gb-A-Bb-Db-C-B-D-Eb in concert pitch) for the saxophone’s melodic material. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the dodecaphonic techniques employed by Thomys in this movement; however, versions of this row form the basis for the saxophone’s melodic statements. Additionally, Thomys favors melodic sequences to propel the music forward, in addition to chromaticism in the piano. An extended saxophone cadenza follows, before the final statement of the saxophone’s melodic material and a short coda.

Thomys’ *Miniatures in Various Styles* is a well-conceived work for alto saxophone and piano that players and audiences will enjoy. He seamlessly weaves intricate contrapuntal gestures, jazz, and 20th century compositional practice into a work that is as musically challenging and rewarding as any contemporary saxophone work today.

¹ Alojzy Thomys, preface to *Miniatures in Various Styles* for alto saxophone and piano, Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne SA, Kraków, 1968.