

Brandon Nelson's *Adolphic Vignettes*
Analysis by Brian Kauth

2014 served as the bicentennial of the saxophone's inventor, Adolphe Sax. Throughout the year, many festivals, concerts, and compositions paid homage to Sax's genius and his signature creation. Brandon Nelson's (<https://bnelsonmusic.wordpress.com/>) *Adolphic Vignettes*, premiered by this author at the Shirley Fiterman Art Gallery in New York City in May 2015, is an admirable addition to the ever-growing list of compositions for alto saxophone and piano.

The work's title is appropriate, as each brief movement portrays the voice of Adolphe Sax in a different musical setting. Constructed as a set of five miniatures, each (with the exception of the Prelude) uses pre-existing music as the point of departure, including Dufay's secular chanson "Mon cher amy", the "Agnus Dei" from Josquin's *Missa L'Homme Armé*, and Franck's Symphony in D minor. All of the above musical references are to music from Sax's homeland of Belgium. The Postlude quotes the English horn solo from Act III of Wagner's magnificent *Tristan und Isolde* – a work which, according to legendary saxophonist Sigurd M. Raschèr, utilized the saxophone in its original version.

A series of four structural harmonies musically unify the work, supplying all of the melodic and harmonic content. There are several interesting features of these harmonies: 1) each is based on the [01368] set class; 2) the pitch C is common to all four harmonies; 3) when all of the pitches are placed sequentially, 10 out of the 12 possible pitches are used; and 4) there is a preponderance of fourth and fifth intervals. All four structural harmonies are displayed in the piece's program notes.

The opening Prelude utilizes only two harmonies – the first consists of the pitches C-F-B-D-G, and the second contains E-F-C-G-Bb. This opening soliloquy by the saxophonist uses mostly the pitches from the first harmony, either in their original or transposed forms. Since the pianist only plays the opening chord of this movement, the saxophonist must drive the music forward. The composer wrote the movement without bar lines, enabling the saxophonist a little flexibility to play in a more recitative-like style – perfectly suitable to saxophone's rich tone quality.

The second vignette, "Mon cher amy", displays a perpetual motion-like character, evinced by the piano's constant eighth-note rhythms for the first nineteen measures. This character is disrupted for the remainder of the movement through the placement of eighth- and sixteenth-rests. Harmonically, the piano cycles through all four structural harmonies before measure 19, at which point the first harmony is sustained for the remainder of the movement. The saxophone part alludes to all four structural harmonies by utilizing tones common to all of them. The saxophonist is also required to employ the slap-tongue articulation for the majority of the movement, before reverting to standard articulations for the final phrase. It is imperative that the saxophonist strive to achieve as much tone as possible from the slap-tongue articulations, rather than an unpitched "smack" or "pop". The desired tone would be akin to a string player's pizzicato technique.

"L'Homme Armé", the third vignette, possesses the most intricate rhythmic ideas of the entire work. The piano plods along in a constant 2/4 meter, with the saxophone playing an implied 3/4 meter (denoted by continuous triplets), creating a hybrid 3-against-2 rhythm – not unlike the rhythmic ideas used by Josquin and other Renaissance composers in their vocal motets and masses. Harmonically, the piano cycles through the structural harmonies in the following order for the entire vignette: 2, 3, 4, 1. The saxophone melodically utilizes tones found in structural harmonies 3 and 4 (G, Bb, C, D, A, F). This movement also makes extensive use of the saxophone's altissimo register, culminating on a high B. Perhaps the most difficult feat for the saxophonist, aside from the rhythmic displacement of the melody, is maintaining a mezzo-piano dynamic and singing style on the high tones. It is very easy to create a dynamic imbalance with the piano and play too loudly, creating a "forced" sound. The attentive saxophonist will realize that the high tones will speak clearly with minimal effort, and that it's necessary to use a round, supported tone in this register, as well as employing a narrow vibrato to assist in achieving a true singing style.

Nelson's fourth vignette is based on César Franck's Symphony in D minor. He creates an unstable rhythmic sense through arpeggiated harmonies in the pianist's right-hand – alternating quintuplets, sextuplets, and sixteenth-notes, while the pianist's left-hand quotes from the opening of the second movement of Franck's symphony. Interestingly, the basic structural harmonies for this vignette begin with the second, cycle through the third and fourth, and end with the first. Other points of interest in this section are the saxophone's melodic references to the second and third vignettes, the presence of timbre variations (through the use of alternate fingerings) for the section's two primary tones (A# and F#), and chromatic "sigh" figures that cap off the saxophone's final gesture. The saxophonist must ensure that pitch alterations are kept to a minimum when employing the *bisbigliando* technique – the only perceivable differences are in the timbres of the different tones.

The final vignette, a Postlude, references the English horn solo from the opening of Act III of Richard Wagner's opera, *Tristan und Isolde*. According to esteemed saxophonist Sigurd M. Raschèr, this solo was originally scored to be played on the alto saxophone, but Wagner later changed it to English horn after a dispute with Adolphe Sax¹. Musically, this vignette is very simple, as Nelson's unifying harmonies proceed in order, and the melodic structure consists of three basic phrases. The first two of these phrases are inversions of one another, while the final phrase repeats the same motif in progressively higher octaves with softer dynamics. Of interest is the presence of two descending lines in the first melodic statement, one in whole steps, the other

chromatic. This reverses in the second phrase to ascending lines, due to the entire phrase being an inversion of the first. A warm singing tone quality is necessary for this haunting melody, and subtle emphases may be placed on the chromatic tones to bring them out. Following the last of the piano's rolled chords, the saxophonist has the final word, as the last motif ascends into the altissimo register, fading away to silence.

Brandon Nelson has contributed a fantastic work for saxophone and piano with his *Adolphic Vignettes*. The musical demands placed upon the saxophone/piano duo are well worth studying and rehearsing in order to bring this music to life.

¹ Sigurd M. Raschèr, "Tristan and the Saxophone." *The Raschèr Reader*, ed. Lee Patrick (Fredonia: Daniel A. Reed Library, 2014), 287-290.