

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT CLASSICAL ORGAN MUSIC IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

African related pieces in the organ Repertoire is a question not often challenged even if few scholarly studies exist; most of them concerning Afro-American composers. Practically, this means that in order to schedule a concert, “usual” organists will not give many names and these names won’t be the same in New-York, Lagos or Paris, where the “reputation” of Jean-Louis Florentz, for instance did not go as far as the landscapes he used to dream. Because of a specific project (Myrelingues, born in Lyon, but involving international partners); this question of Organ Repertoire became a pragmatic issue, including the opportunity of commissioning new works. This article gathers information from various sources related to the expanse of this field. In connection with this experience, Africa is considered a very large connecting topic including non-African composers. In addition, it also opens questions of inter-textuality, the importance of figures and consequences of dialog between musical works during the process of a kind of “birth” of such a Repertoire.

Keywords: Organ music, African related Repertoire, Myrelingues, New reception of music, Musical inter-textuality.

INTRODUCTION

African Music has often been a representation of musical traditions or practices of the African people that live in the Continent of African. However, the changing times have seen the integration of other cultures into African music and the complexity of African music rhythms forming a network of distinct yet related traditions which overlap in certain aspects of style, usage or practice and sharing basic procedures as well as contextual similarities. This paper in considering the significant role played by the organ instrument in classical music, shares its considerations in the African Context. Therefore, this article may not be an orthodox African study about organ music, or rather talking of Africa and organ music, but considers that

classical music has become presently a worldwide universal network of composers and performers.

DISCUSSION

Studies about Afro-descendant composers of organ music may be slightly more accomplished in the United States. Yet, musical research in this field stay fresh, and Terry (2000) has to start his anthology of Afro-American organ music with these worlds: “contrary to popular belief, the classical music of African Americans not only includes works that are based on the Negro Spiritual, but also include compositions based on or influenced by a variety of sources”. Johnson (1995), editing Florence Price’s music notes the first national attention for her organ music awaited in the National Convention of the American Guild of Organists in Atlanta in 1992. Here is a more cosmopolitan point of view and this may suppose an even more exciting focus on this question.

The considerations inside the following discourse lean mainly on an original experience started in Lyon France in 2014 in a local project called Myrelingues. The idea (Vaud, 2016) was to connect, in many ways, Classical music, Africa and West Indies, through concerts, educational projects, commissions of new works and conferences, among others. At the beginning, organ was not at all, at the center of the project, but various elements led to its emergence in March 2014; a first organ concert *In Memoriam*. Jean Louis Florentz, a French composer, who used to be the Ethnomusicology chair in Lyon Conservatoire and who was founder in organ music concert in Africa disappeared for ten years. Since then, there was not a year for Myrelingues without a music organ event, with major contributions, such as concerts by the young and talented American performer Alcee Chriss¹. These concerts

1 Alcee Chriss, winner of the 2017 Montreal Organ International competition, and completing a musical PhD at Oberlin University.

featured some classical repertoire such as Bach, Debussy, Alain, and Dupre but they also posed a challenge with regard to finding Africa or West Indies related organ music repertoire. Each new program and performer was the occasion of a new contribution in this regard. Of course, Fela Sowande was one of the first composers to perform but Afro-American composers such as George Walker, Florence Price and Art Tatum or “British” composers like Ignatius Sancho, Samuel Coleridge Taylor and Errollyn Wallen were on occasion to hear some music not so often performed. In the end, there is an interesting number of scores which were performed and even more kept arriving in the library of the project (Vaud, 2016).

Yet, more than a simple list of pieces and composers, this experience brought many observations and considerations in this field. Furthermore, naturally, the project developed international friendship and since 2017, very active connections started on the African soil with first actions in Lagos Nigeria for instance². It was quite obvious that in a few years all this would reveal very much about the organ microcosm and about what, at first seemed to be irremediable obstacle - the delicate situations of organ instruments in Africa and West Indies. If some instruments exist, they seem to belong to a semi-romantic past when Maurice Duruflé and Albert Schweitzer³ played instruments. They, however, lost the careers they took and are not really any more in good shape enough to defend great music.

This material fact was perhaps not the main difficulty with regard to seeing the kind of valuable repertoire that could emerge in the organ field around this theme of Africa and West Indies. In France like in other European countries, many organists know the gospel repertoire and choirs which used to regularly perform in churches. However, it seems there is a gap

2 17th of November, 2018, Facebook live with Alliance Française de Lagos during the week Only Africa organised in Lyon.

3 Albert Schweitzer was a convinced amateur performer in Lambarene and Maurice Duruflé performed in Marroco in the 1950's.

between this form of music and the classical or contemporary music universe. Furthermore, by chance or lack of chance, one of the most “African implied” Western Europe composer, Jean Louis Florentz, wrote such difficult form of music that his pieces are rarely performed, as they need very efficient instruments and have probably never have been heard in concert on the African continent. Florentz himself was conscious of this question and his last work (*L’Enfant noir op 17*) should have included easier pieces; unfortunately he was only able to finish the Prelude. In his introduction, Florentz (2003) the composer announces that his pieces “written for younger organists, are framed by a Prelude and a Postlude lasting 8 minutes each. These two “professional” pieces require greater virtuosity, and were inspired by the poem quoted at the head of Camara Laye’s novel”. Considering the possible cloudy sky that could have rapidly purchased the first idea of the Myrelingues project, it is even more interesting to see what merged in this purpose.

A brief survey of Myrelingues organ programs and projects

Organ music concerts were not the easier type of concert to manage in France when Myrelingues started his project. It was not so easy to convince the non-classical audience to attend such events as the project started little by little, step by step. The project, also interested in oral griot tradition (the title “Myrelingues” means the thousand languages) proposed this little introductory text about tradition and organ music:

Petit Bodiel le lièvre avait connu une grande déconvenue restée dans toutes les mémoire alors qu'il voulu organiser sa grande fête avec le produit des récoltes de l'oncle éléphant et hippopotame. Il en voulu naturellement beaucoup aux termites qui avaient permis de déjouer ce plan. Néanmoins, si la parole et la mémoire se transmettent toujours, la rancœur finit par s'adoucir. Et c'est ainsi qu'un jour, les descendants de Petit Bodiel et le monde des termites retrouvèrent l'occasion de se parler. Le vent, à la fête, ne laissa pas passer cette occasion en s'engouffrant et en

passant sans relâche des terriers aux cheminées des termitières. On dit que c'est de ce moment que revirent le jour les musiques d'orgue en Afrique...⁴

Translation

Petit Bodiel the hare once expressed a great public shame after his attempt to give a feast with the harvest of Uncle Elephant and Hippo. He was very full of anger against the termite who acted against his plan. Anyway, if the word and memory always make their way, resentment in the end leads to loss of its strength. And one day, Petit Bodiel's sons and the Termites had an occasion to talk about all this. And the wind, quite happy, did not let go this opportunity visiting without rest all the termite cheminee under the earth. And one said that it is from that day that we could hear again the Organ music in Africa...

Since 2014, Myrelingues prepared organ projects with a cosmopolitan team of performers⁵: among them Gabriel Bestion de Camboulas, Hyewon Minh, Edouard Delale, Frédéric Champion, Alcee Chriss, Nathan Mondry, Louis Jullien, Arthur Saunier, Adejola Adeosun, Arthur Nicolas-Nauche and at least the direct or indirect help of another half dozen organists. This was an interesting beginning, sufficient to get various experiences and stylistic approaches. During these concerts, various pieces were scheduled including very classical repertoire from Bach, Dupré, Franck, and some vocal repertoire with a choir or a gospel soloist. Yet, another part of the concerts consisted in related repertoire with Africa and Caraïbs and /or commission or premiere of new works.

About transcriptions or Repertoire, the Myrelingues series were the occasion to listen to Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), a "British" composer of African descent who published some music very early, transcriptions or Joseph Boulogne dit le Chevalier Saint Georges (1745-1799), including a transcription of his *3rd Symphony*, pieces by Edmond Dédé, William Grant Still, Florence Price, Noel Da Costa, Ulisses Kay, Georges Walker, Adolphus Hailstork, Art Tatum, and Errollyn Wallen but also Edoardo Nazareth, Fela Sowande, Godwin Sadoh,

4 Myrelingues, September 2018, after Hamaté Bâ.

5 At least from France, Switzerland, United States, Korea and Nigeria.

Honore Diakanua Wayawa, Joseph Hanson Kwabena Nketia, Stefans Grové, Jean-Baptiste Robin and Jean-Louis Florentz. This means a large number of composers (including women composers) of various countries and also some scores awaiting future occasions to be heard and performed. This field is so much “in progress” that it seems hard to now stop a classification and comparison of these works.

About the new pieces born with the project, they are also very different, one from the other. Since the beginning of the project, the following composers wrote or prepared a work for Myrelingues: Edouard Delale (see Appendix), Ali Osman, Godwin Sadow, Nathan Mondry and Jean Eric Bitang. Godwin Sadow recently published his *Franco-African Triptych for organ*, conceived *In Memoriam* (Jean-Louis Florentz). *Sufies Ritual*, the piece by Ali Osman was harmonized for the organ by Frédéric Champion and Edouard Delale, who quoted traditional Caraibean tunes take the title *Pour raviver le Verso Solaire de Nos Rêves* form Aimé Césaire.

Circulation vs instruments

Organ instruments availability can quickly become a critical question in preparing a project. France is full of different instruments and among them some are rather deficient or out of order. Some of them also offer more or less facilities in order to perform. Of course, these elements, plus climatic conditions were constant issues in order to prepare the next collaboration. Yet, somehow, projects succeed to imagine collaborations in different places and on different instruments. As it happens for the (various) performers involved, the result was not that in the end the project became specialized on a narrow repertoire or mechanic specificity. It was rather much more important that the pieces could travel in different places. And this point of view, in a way, made it much more easy to imagine some project in Caraïbs

or in Africa where very few available instruments corresponding to the international standards seem available.

Professional vs “amateurs”

Quite surely, Myrelingues is quite an unusual initiative in the organ field while the organ universe itself stays as a quite specific microcosm in the Western classical musical world. The organ world is very organized with some musicians responsible for their instruments and a complex system of invitations in organ series. Most of them try to organize (few) concerts several months in advance. This was not always very matchable with opportunities of the project but Myrelingues was lucky enough to make efficient partnership with important performers in order to find “a little place” in this universe.

While the project was emerging, it became more and more obvious that there could have been a serious problem with regard to defending its consistency. It was not necessary that most of the musicians we met at first could not imagine easily fitting this links between organ music in Africa (aside the personality of Jean Louis Florentz), but the major concern was the fact that links between Africa and organ could also involve “amateurs” performers. By amateur, this does not mean that these musicians have no skills, but that they may also have a non-musical professional activity. In the past years, in Africa (in Senegal and Madagascar) several occasional organ concerts were staged by such performers while at the same time many younger organ students got professional positions in France. For instance, since the best known pieces referring to Africa are very difficult even for professionals, we could imagine a kind of abyssal gap between these two universes.

By chance, three points helped to solve this potential issue. The first one was educational matters. A lot of Myrelingues projects had an educational based dimension, either for young pupils or even because they address a non-classical audience. This always makes the context of performing such pieces easier or more informal and none of the performers are involved; and some of them, winners of international competition ever complain about the particular conditions of performance offered by Myrelingues.

The second one was the attempt to mix the universe of performers. Part of them were professional performers - as understood in the European musician standards, - some of them were students - and in a little part, some of them did not belong to the European picture where everyone knew and could situate almost everyone, and it challenged this amateur dimension. This was, for instance, a composer and/or organist, performing the music he composed, although performance was clearly not his/her principal activity. The less known frontiers of Jazz or Gospel and its performers also helped erasing these distinctions.

Third was musical theme and inspiration. When working on the 18th century Chevalier Saint George, or the idea of a tribute to Jean-Louis Florentz (Sadoh, 2018), it was also an occasion to raise such interrogation. Writing *In Memoriam* (Jean-Louis Florentz) was a way to observe his music from Africa however difficult the original Repertoire could be. Alain Guede (1999) recalls that Saint George, besides his composition skills, was also a very good musical manager, leading the *Concert des Amateurs*⁶, talented enough to be considered as one of the best existing orchestra, able to premier Mozart and Haydn works. Saint George himself had an adventurous life and was able to manage simultaneously various activities. This was the

⁶ *Le Concert des amateurs*, orchestra operating between 1769 and 1781 in Paris at the Hotel de Soubise. Initiated by François-Joseph Gossec. Joseph Bologne becomes main conductor in 1773.

occasion of interesting discussion and a way to prevent misunderstandings between musicians coming from very different regions of the universe.

Attraction versus misunderstanding

To be honest, it was not always difficult to imagine an organ concert presenting Afro-Caribbean related Repertoire. Perhaps because it is also a kind of exotic program for the audience, it seems quite suitable in order to imagine a “different” program during a concert season. Another advantage of the thematic point of view was also the possibility to imagine musical combinations larger than a solo organ program. Some of the concerts involved a small choir, a gospel singer or a flutist. These solutions were a good idea in order to seduce concerts organizers who try to offer more to their audience than just a solo performance.

Yet, performing once is a one thing, and more and more organizers agree they need to try new things in order to change and re-motivate their audience. But another thing is to convince them of the value of this field and kind of music; and succeeding once with a very virtuoso concert is not a definitive victory. Organizers are doubtful enough to wonder if you have other such excellent possibilities to offer.

This does not mean we need to keep being pessimistic in front of a domain which will need to always demonstrate its value. A better knowledge and diffusion of the composers and artists could help in the future. Two other things may also help. The “value” of an Afro-Caribbean repertoire performed on modern instruments such as organs may also be connected with two further elements.

About the meaning of such music, as we saw, some of these pieces have connections with literature (Laye, Cezaire), and because African literature has already obtained a great respect,

this could be a way to legitimize, in a way, a part of this repertoire and the writers and poets are perhaps the ones to lead by meeting and convincing the rest of us.

Another point is probably a necessary disambiguation about the question of the sound of the African organ. In Europe, the organ lost a part of its role to sustain the choral expression of the audience in the Church. The “power” of the instrument is attached to an almost past and romantic repertoire full of stylistic questions of interpretation. The organ is almost never more a wild powerful animal to try to domesticate. The sound of the contemporary organ should be different and bring something new. Certainly, there is a kind of misunderstanding when some African organists seem to enjoy the discovery of a Grand organ with some standards of the repertoire, or when organ composition proposes very few registers. This is also why the jazz “metissage” of music offers a reasonable alternative for some European ears because it offers a sufficiently different kind of music. The expectation of what the sound of African organ music could be is certainly a key in order to encourage the development of this music.

Conclusion, other repertoires and inter-textuality

It is certainly very early to imagine definitive conclusions on this subject. What is quite exciting is to see the new connections able to grow, even in places where there are no traditional organs. If performers met and discussed they could decide to schedule a new *rendez-vous* or to borrow a piece or ask for a manuscript. From the beginning, many links appear with literature and/ or imaginary landscape easily suggesting new ideas to the composers. It is certainly regarding Florentz Organ African landscape that we need to read Jean Baptiste Robin’s forewords to his piece *Regards vers l’Aïr* presented as a “purely fictional subject: the piece is an evocation of the Aïr massif in Niger” (Robin, 2007). As we

saw, pieces start to dialog between them and there are a few things missing in order to develop widely the curiosity of the audience. This is the birth of what the French linguist Gerard Genette would have called, a “*horizon d’attente*”, this meaning a place where you appreciate a piece not only for itself but because of its rich artistic connections with what you already know. Organ projects usually take a lot of time to succeed. Perhaps some observers thought one day that Africa and Caraïbs would stay for long very poor in this field. What we saw emerging in very few years, seems to demonstrate exactly the contrary.

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APPENDIX

Incipit of Edouard DELALE, *Pour raviver le Verso Solaire de Nos Rêves pour orgue*

à Hyewon Min,
" POUR RAVIVER LE VERSO SOLAIRE DES REVES "

commande du festival Myrelingues

"pour dire...

*pour revitaliser le rugissement des phosphènes
le coeur creux des comètes*

*pour raviver le verso solaire des rêves
leur laitance
pour activer le frais flux des sèves la mémoire
des silicates*

*colère des peuples débouché des Dieux leur ressaut
patienter le mot son or son orle
jusqu' à ignivome
sa bouche"*

(Aimé Césaire)

Récit : Fonds 8' 4', Basson-hautbois 8', boîte fermée
G.O. : Fonds doux de 8' (Flûtes, Bourdons)
Pos. : Fonds doux 4' 2', boîte ouverte
Ped. : Tir. R.

Tourmenté ♩ = 100

G.O. *mp*

pp *mf* *pp*

Partie assurée par l'assistant de registration
R.

tenuto

pp

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About the Author

Thomas Sylvand studied at Lyon University and Paris IV Sorbonne and graduated in Oboe and Chamber Music at the Conservatoire Regional de Lyon. Specialized in music management, he worked for Giverny International Chamber music festival, European Camerata, Opera Studio de Genève and the Orchestre des Pays de Savoie. He was awarded by the Europera Prize for Jewish Culture for the project “Sirba octet” and he published *Passages*, “*quelques histoires de compositeurs en Alpes et Pays de Savoie* and *Un cygne noir; considerations autour de Guillaume Dufay, Saint Maurice et la Maison de Savoie*” (éditions belles couleurs). In 2014, he was associated to the beginning of the Myrelingues Project in Lyon.