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A MODERN PERCUSSION EDITION OF DARIUS MILHAUD'S LA CRÉATION DU MONDE

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A Modern Percussion Edition of Darius Milhaud's *La Création du Monde*

Synopsis:

Preparing a performance of *La création du monde* can be daunting, as the parts are rental-only, heavy in errata, and marked in French. The wind and string instrumentation is frugal, allowing the assembly of a small but necessarily facile ensemble—yet it is the percussion writing itself that could lead one to ignore the work. We hope to change the minds of those who have done so by offering a primer of sorts for interested percussionists.

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Introduction

Preparing a performance of *La création du monde* can be daunting, as the parts are rental-only, heavy in errata, and marked in French. The wind and string instrumentation is frugal, allowing the assembly of a small but necessarily facile ensemble—yet it is the percussion writing itself that could lead one to ignore the work. We hope to change the minds of those who have done so by offering a primer of sorts for interested percussionists.

Milhaud calls for a wide variety of percussion instruments to be played by a single percussionist and timpanist in an impressive display of technique. The strongest barrier is the early (and sometimes ambiguous) multi-percussion notation. Milhaud scored each instrument in one of four staves, with the rhythms beamed together across those staves. This confusing barrage of blank space and vertical alignment makes these challenging parts even more difficult to read and execute. This problem is not found solely with Milhaud's works. Another example occurs in Stravinsky's percussion parts for *l'Histoire du Soldat*; many percussionists perform from William Kraft's or Frank Epstein's modern edition instead of the original. This study attempts to accomplish the same feat – taking away the barriers of language, instrument choice, logistical layout of equipment, and notation that may deter some from performing this composition. All musical examples and analyses in this study are taken from the 1929 full score edition from Editions Max Eschig, as a primary source in Milhaud's hand was not available. Using historical documentation from primary sources and careful examination, translation, and interpretation of available editions, this study provides percussionists with the tools and information required to prepare and perform this work.

Percussion Instrument Selection

Milhaud's instrumentation is connected to jazz through the percussion writing. He recreated the "complicated percussion section played by one man"¹ he had seen in Harlem with a multitude of percussive sounds scored for one performer: metal block (literal translation), wood block, crash cymbal, snare drum, medium tom-tom, field drum, tambourine, and a pedaled bass drum with a detachable cymbal. While the percussion parts in the work were inspired by a jazz drum set player's performance, the writing is still firmly in the orchestral world, with distinct colors and rhythms that lack the lengthy and constant patterns of the jazz genre (with the exception of isolated ostinati). In addition, the traditional division between membranophones and idiophones is maintained through the writing style. Such vast sonic resources in the hands of a single percussionist and a single timpanist are reminiscent of the jazz set drummer, who conjures color from rim shots, brush strokes, cowbell clangs, and a host of overtones on cymbals struck anywhere from the crown to the edge. In total, Milhaud's prescribed ensemble was, on multiple levels, a kindred spirit to the jazz bands of Harlem. Its economy of size and plethora of percussion timbres would have been instantly familiar to any authentic American jazz performer or listener. However, the actual performance practice concerns that arise from the prescribed instrumentation are another matter entirely.

As with any foreign language source, the verbatim translation is often clouded by idiomatic phrases and outdated or changed meanings. This challenge presents itself in *La création du monde* through the marked instrumentation and the performance indications the composer included. All of the 1929 Eschig score's markings that specifically pertain to the percussion parts (excluding the instrumentation) are translated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Note	Translation/Interpretation
aigues	High-pitched
Gr. C. seule (avec Cymba. Décrochée)	Bass drum only (with cymbal detached) [obsolete]
avec baguette de bois (a la main)	With a wooden mallet (in the hand)
Le trille indique le pouce, l'accent le coup frappe avec le poing	The trill indicates to use a thumb roll, the accent should be with a sudden strike of the fist
Avec le pied	With the foot [pedal]
Très sec	Very dry
Appuyer une bag. sur la peau et frapper sur cet. av. l'autre	Put one stick on the drum head and hit it with the other stick (rim shot)
Avec les 2 baguettes	With both sticks
Accrochez la Cymb. a la pédale	Attach the cymbal to the foot pedal [obsolete]
déchrochez la cymb.	Detach the cymbal from the foot pedal [obsolete]

Milhaud specified *tambour de basque*, *bloc de metal*, *bloc de bois*, *cymbales*, *caisse claire*, *caisse roulante*, *tambourin*, *grosse caisse à pied avec cymbal*, *2 petite timbales*, and *3 timbales*. These parts should be assigned to two performers – a multi-percussionist and a timpanist. *Bloc de bois*, *tambour de basque*, *caisse claire*, and *timbales* provide no difficulties, translating directly into the modern instruments of woodblock, tambourine, snare drum, and timpani, respectively. The performer should interpret the *bloc de metal* carefully however. While this literally translates into “block of metal,” this would usually mean an unpitched, solid piece of metal such as an anvil. However, Milhaud would later state that, “in the jazz context of *La création du monde*, the performer should utilize a cowbell to achieve the desired color.”² Most recordings one hears of the work feature percussionists who have made this same interpretative decision, confirmed by Russ Girsberger in his 2000 article *Percussive Notes* “Darius Milhaud’s ‘*La création du monde*’: The Problems with the Parts.”

The *caisse roulante*, literally a “rolling drum,” should be interpreted as a tenor drum without snares; a field drum with the snares off will also serve in this capacity. Milhaud clearly

intended the various unpitched drums in *La création du monde* to create a spectrum of voicings similar to the voices in a choir or consort. In the score's initial instrumentation listing, the three unpitched drums are listed in the order of *caisse claire*, *caisse roulante*, and *tambourin* (highest to lowest in pitch, respectively). Throughout the score, the individual staves for these instruments are always placed next to each other and in that order from top to bottom. In his use of melodic motives stated on these drums, Milhaud's writing in these unpitched drums mirrors the pitched melodic elements in his scoring of the ballet. Thus, the drum used for the *caisse roulante* should be pitched between the snare drum and the *tambourin*; a floor tom should be used to match the other drums and it will serve the melodic function of the *tambourin*. Care should be taken to differentiate amongst the pitches of all drums, from highest (*caisse claire*, or snare drum) to lowest (*grosse caisse*, or bass drum).

The call for a *tambourin* is potentially the most confusing of the percussion assignments. *Tambourin* is the French term for the *tabor*, a drum with a medieval history rooted in northern Spain and the Provençe region of southern France. It is important, for one, that the performer not confuse the tambourine part (*tambour de basque*) with the *tabor* part (*tambourin*). Secondly, the historical nature of the French *tabor* is open to interpretation in the context of this work. The *New Grove Dictionary of Music* outlines these varying definitions of the tabor:

The tabor (Fr. *tambourin*) is usually a small side drum with a gut snare. The snare crosses the head that is struck, or snares may be provided on both heads. The tabor varies in shape; it may be shallow or about as deep as it is wide (e.g. the Basque atabal), or very deep, with the shell twice as long as the heads are wide...the Provençal model...The tabor is slung from the wrist or shoulder of the player's left arm and is beaten by a stick held in the right hand. In Provençe it is regarded as important to strike the snare itself, to produce a continuous droning sound underlying the beaten rhythm.³

It is readily apparent that some deliberation is necessary when choosing the appropriate instrument. The clearest and most appropriate model of the various forms of the *tabor* is the *tambourin provençale* mentioned in the New Grove article. Milhaud hailed from Provence, where he spent his childhood. In addition, Milhaud specifically called for the *tambourin provençale* in other works such as the *Concerto pour batterie et petit orchestra* (1930) and *Suite Française* (1944). However, considering the jazz sounds on which *La création du monde* was engendered, a “ringing gut snare drone” does not seem appropriate, nor does it fit the writing pattern for Milhaud’s composition in which the snare drum is treated as a top drum voice and the tenor or field drum is treated as a middle voice.

Therefore it is the shape and pitch of the *tambourin* that should serve as the model of the modern instrument selected for performance. The recording of Milhaud conducting the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées orchestra in *La création du monde* confirms this conclusion, as the instrument utilized for the *tambourin* part is clearly an instrument with sonic properties similar to a large tom.⁴ The dimensions and sonic properties of the *tambourin provençal* closely match a large tom utilized in most modern wind and percussion ensembles. It is important to note that Warren Howe, in his 1979 article “The Percussionist's Guide to Darius Milhaud's *La Crèation du Monde*,” suggested that a cocktail drum should be utilized in place of the *tabor*.⁵ A cocktail drum is visible in film of a live performance of the Orchestre Nationale du France with Leonard Bernstein conducting. While a cocktail drum is of the proper pitch and dimensions, its relative rarity in modern percussion inventories make it an optional choice in these authors’ estimations. If such an instrument is already in the ensemble’s inventory, or if it can be

acquired easily, then it should be played with a stick like a tom, not with a pedal. If a cocktail drum is not available, then a low floor tom will function in its stead.

The *grosse caisse à pied avec cymbales* provides the final challenge within the percussion instrumentation. The “kick bass drum” indicated by the score is common enough, but the notation “avec cymbales” is confusing and anachronistic to the modern percussion performer. Warren Howe provided the answers in his 1979 article:

During the 1920’s a small cymbal was often attached to the bass drum adjacent to the foot beater. A small metal beater was attached to the bass drum beater in a vertical angle which is extended to the cymbal. As the foot pedal was pressed down, the bass drum beater would strike the drum and simultaneously cause the small vertical metal beater attached to its shaft to strike the cymbal. At the players discretion the metal beater could be moved so it would not strike the cymbal.⁶

Howe goes on to provide a diagram of his suggested placement of the myriad of percussion instruments required by *La création du monde*. Curiously, his diagram features a horizontal (not vertical) metal beater striking the cymbal, but this configuration makes sense and could be recreated by any modern percussionist without specialized equipment. However, reaching down, in the heat of the moment, to engage or reengage the cymbal can be difficult in a performance setting. A far more simple and practical method is to use a slightly open, modern hi-hat. When the bass drum part calls for simultaneous striking of the cymbal, two feet can be employed. As for the bass drum, one could select a larger bass drum to mimic a concert sound, as opposed to a smaller, higher-pitched drum on a jazz combo kit. This not only provides the sound desired by the composer (as determined by listening to the same recording mentioned in the section regarding the *tambourin*), but it provides the necessary contrast in color and pitch to the large *tambourin* drum. Whatever the drum choice may be, it is important to maintain the

clear contrast in general pitch, as well as keeping the head free of any muffling to allow maximum resonance.

The timpani, although familiar instruments, were originally scored in a way that would be unfamiliar to the modern performer. The two smallest timpani are scored in a separate staff, in treble clef, and referred to as “petites timbales” in the score; the parts also note that these two smallest timpani are “aigues” (high-pitched).⁷ These two timpani are pitched in D and F[#], both above middle-C. Therefore, two roto-toms are recommended, as this pitch cannot be attained on the standard, 20-inch piccolo drums utilized in most modern ensembles. Stretching the timpani part for one performer across multiple staves only serves to generate extra effort, albeit slight, in reading the part. Thus, one may combine the staves into a single-staff part in bass clef, a task also accomplished in this study.

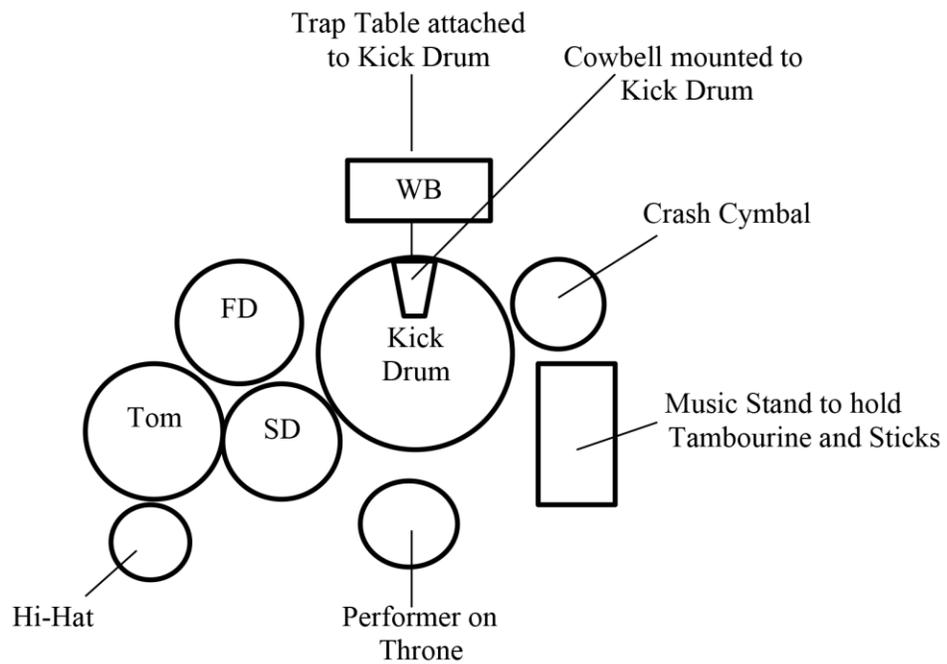
Logistics of Instrumentation

Of course, careful planning is necessary to ensure that one percussionist is able to play all of these instruments simultaneously. Some percussion instruments must be played in rapid succession, leaving little time to move to a new station or to switch to a different implement. These instructions, diagrams, and photos are included in an adapted format below and in the modern percussion edition.

Figure 2

Diagram of Suggested Percussion Setup

AUDIENCE



WB = Woodblock
FD = Field Drum
SD = Snare Drum

Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



In addition to these diagrams and photos, videos of a recent performance featuring the authors of this study are available at the following link: <http://goo.gl/uRd0lo>. These videos will provide live demonstrations of the instrumentation discussed above, as well as the placement of all the individual instruments.

Modern Edition of Percussion Parts

As discussed earlier, percussion notation in *La création du monde* can be daunting to the aspiring performer. In addition, the percussion parts (not the Eschig score) are rife with errata. Russ Girsberger's article from *Percussive Notes* gave an extensive listing of these errata and the appropriate corrections.⁸ All of those corrections have been included in this modern edition, which was undertaken with permission from the copyright holder, Universal Music Group.

Included are the parts for the multi-percussionist and timpanist. The percussion part has been reduced to one staff to be read as such:

Figure 6

Hi-Hat with Foot Kick Drum Low Tom Field Drum (snare off) Snare Drum (snare on) Crash Cymbal

(Cymbales avec Pedal) (Grosse Caisse a Pied) (Tambourin) (Caisse Roulante) (Caisse Claire) (Cymbal)

Woodblock Cowbell Tambourine

(Bloc de Bois) (Bloc de Metal) (Tambour de Basque)

All of the instrument choices recommended in this study are included as markings in the modern parts. Though specific technical instructions are translated into English, stylistic and tempo markings are left in their original French. Any pedaling instructions in the modern timpani part are intended only to be executed on the full-size instruments, as the D and F# are played on the roto-toms and will not vary in tuning throughout the work. The modern editions of the percussion parts are freely available in PDF format at the following link:

<http://goo.gl/EyMfk5>. These parts were created and are distributed for academic purposes with kind permission from MGB Hal Leonard of Italy. Please note that the parts may only be performed when the entire work is rented.

Conclusion

It is the authors' intentions that the information contained in this article will provide the percussionists considering a performance of *La création du monde* the confidence to not only execute the work, but also to be certain of their own decisions regarding interpretation, equipment, and any other performance considerations. Its extrinsic value as a frontrunner in the cross-pollination of jazz and Western art music make it infinitely more rewarding as a snapshot of exoticism and arts collaboration in Paris during one of the city's most colorful eras. *La création du monde* is also one of the earliest examples of percussion being featured within a mixed chamber ensemble. The challenging percussion parts and foreign language concerns all provide roadblocks to programming *La création du monde* in a concert, however, the work's intrinsic value as a piece of art music with the visual array of technical prowess from the percussionists make it a worthy addition to any performance.

1. Milhaud, Darius. *Ma Vie Heureuse*, 110.
2. Michael Rosen in "Terms Used in Percussion: The Milhaud Concerto pour batterie et petite orchestre." *Percussive Notes* 26/1 (Fall 1987), 31.
3. Anthony C. Baines and Hélène La Rue. "Tabor and Pipe" in *New Grove Dictionary of Music*. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/21805> (Accessed February 27, 2011)
4. *La création du monde*, Orchestre du Théâtre des Champs Elysées. Darius Milhaud. 2005.
5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeXgEURsf-E>, accessed 2 March, 2011.
6. Warren Howe in "The Percussionist's Guide to Darius Milhaud's *La Création du Monde*." *Percussionist* 17/1 (1979), 37-50.
7. Russ Girsberger in "Darius Milhaud's 'La Création du Monde': The Problems with the Parts" *Percussive Notes* (June, 2000), 55.
8. Russ Girsberger in "Darius Milhaud's 'La Création du monde': The Problems with the Parts" in *Percussive Notes* 38 (June 2000): 56-57, 59.