

The Unaccompanied Solos for Saxophone: Scholarly Notes to
Accompany a CD Recording Project

by

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ABSTRACT

The saxophone is capable of producing a wide variety of tone qualities and playing techniques, with sounds and noises that are unique and irregular. In choosing the repertoire for the CD recording project, I have explored a wide range of pieces that is written for solo saxophone, without any form of accompaniment, and to commission a composer that best described these characteristics. The outcome is this recording, produced at *Studio One* at the University of Lethbridge in November 2013, that consists of the following pieces performed on various sizes of saxophone: *Aeterna* for alto saxophone by John Anthony Lennon (b.1950), *Steady Study on the Boogie* for alto saxophone by Christian Lauba (b.1952), *Mysterious Morning III* for soprano saxophone by Fuminori Tanada (b.1961), a newly commissioned work *Terra Nemo* for baritone saxophone by Piotr Grella-Możejko (b.1961), and *Strata* for tenor saxophone by Colin Labadie (b.1984). This essay discusses the history and analysis of these five pieces from a performer's perspective.

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Introduction

The saxophone was invented by Adolphe Sax (1814–1894), a Belgian musical instrument maker. Based on the most current research, Londeix-Street places the invention of the saxophone between 1838 and at the latest 1841.¹ The saxophone is not a singular instrument, but consists of a whole family of instruments that covers approximately the pitch range of the piano. The usual saxophone family consists of six members: Sopranino, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Baritone and Bass. Additionally there is the contrabass-saxophone, but it is extremely large and rarely used.

Jean-Marie Londeix's book, *Hello! Mr. Sax*. (1989) suggests that:

The saxophone has so many characteristics which are not classical in the Apollinarian or traditional sense of the word, that it is in fact one of the most original instruments, and it is capable of satisfying even the most extensive musical and technical demands made of it.
(Londeix 1989, 1)

The saxophone is capable of producing a wide variety of tone qualities and many sophisticated types of articulation or attacks². Furthermore, it has the possibilities of playing a wide range of dynamics, extremely wide intervals, playing outside the tempered scale, bisbigliando³, multiphonics, and playing sounds and noises unique and irregular, such as key-clicks, pad sounds, and breath effects. Electronic enhancement also adds an

¹ Jean-Marie Londeix-William Street, e-mail message to the author, January 12th, 2014.

² The attack refers to different ways of beginning a tone, which is similar to the effect of different bow strokes on the stringed instruments.

³ As of March 24th, 2014, Ann Griffiths listed on *Oxford Music Online* that bisbigliando, a timbre trill, is a technique to play the same note by alternating different fingerings.

infinite number of variations to this already wide range of possibilities unique to the saxophone.

In choosing the repertoire for this CD recording project, I have explored a wide range of pieces that best described the above-mentioned characteristics. I also chose to commission a composer with a request for new repertoire. Another of my goals was to select a set of pieces from the repertory that is written for solo saxophone, hoping to present the instrument as it is, without any form of accompaniment. The outcome is this recording that consists of the following pieces, performed on various sizes of saxophone: *Aeterna* for alto saxophone by John Anthony Lennon (b.1950), *Steady Study on the Boogie* for alto saxophone by Christian Lauba (b.1952), *Mysterious Morning III* for soprano saxophone by Fuminori Tanada (b.1961), a newly commissioned work *Terra Nemo* for baritone saxophone by Piotr Grella-Mozejko (b.1961), and *Strata* for tenor saxophone by Colin Labadie (b.1984).

This CD project was recorded, edited, mixed, and mastered at *Studio One*, University of Lethbridge, during the month of November 2013. The University of Lethbridge lists on its website that *Studio One* “features a full complement of outboard signal processors, quality preamps, and mastering decks as well as an extensive collection of microphones.” It was recorded with the DigiDesign ProTools HD with HD2 Accel and Core cards. The recording engineers for this project were Thilo Schaller, a professor of Digital Audio Arts at the University of Lethbridge, and Yangke Li, a graduate teaching assistant with the Digital Audio Arts program, University of Lethbridge.

Aeterna for alto saxophone by John Anthony Lennon (b.1950)

John Anthony Lennon is an American composer based in Georgia. Raised in Mill Valley, California, Lennon studied composition with Leslie Bassett, William Bolcom, Eugene Kurtz and William Albright. He has been the recipient of numerous prizes, including the Rome Prize, Guggenheim, Friedheim and Charles Ives Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He has held fellowships at Tanglewood, the Rockefeller Center at Bellagio, the Camargo Foundation, Villa Montalvo, Yaddo, the Atlantic Center for the Arts, and the MacDowell Colony as a Norlin Foundation Fellow. Currently, he is a professor of composition at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.⁴

In *Aeterna*, Lennon employs echoes effects and other acoustically manipulated sounds on the instrument to create the basic momentum for the piece. As David Camwell discusses in his article “Aeterna: Composed by John Anthony Lennon (for solo alto saxophone)” (2007), “many saxophone false fingerings used in this piece create a quick succession of timbres and intonations, with an underlying rhythm that acts as counterpoint” (Camwell 2007, 56). The piece also features an audible difference for the wide dynamic range and false fingering sections.

The use of a large cathedral or church that has a natural high reverberant effect as the performance venue is strongly suggested in order to achieve a successful

⁴John Anthony Lennon, “Biographical Information.” *John Anthony Lennon*, accessed March 16th, 2014, <http://www.music.emory.edu/faculty/lennon/pgcv/cv.html>.

performance.⁵ If the performance is to be held in a small and dry room, the piece may be performed with a Korg echoplex synthesizer as indicated by the composer, or with the help of electric guitar effects pedal, as suggested by Camwell in his article. This version of *Aeterna* was recorded at a small and dry recording studio, without the help of any additional tools. In order to bring out the character of the piece, several plug-ins were used to affect the recorded digital signal on the ProTools program. The plug-ins used were delay, plate (reverb), and autopan.

Camwell observes that “there is no single way in which to approach this piece” (Camwell 2007, 56). He suggests that “with the addition of live electronics, there is time to stretch and pull various phrases” (Camwell 2007, 56). This is very true, especially with the post-production work involved. Although Lennon did suggest some of the false fingerings, the performer must individually explore the possibilities of various fingerings in order to bring out the best results.⁶

Steady Study on the Boogie for alto saxophone by Christian Lauba (b.1952)

Christian Lauba is a French composer. He was born and raised in Sfax, Tunisia, and later moved to Bordeaux with his family. Lauba studied harmony at the Conservatory of Bordeaux with composer Michel Fusté-Lambezat, after his studies in several languages at the University of Bordeaux, France. He was awarded a prize in musical composition, the *Médaille d'Honneur*, from the city of Bordeaux in 1984 and was

⁵ The suggestion is based on the experience of performing this piece at various venues by the author.

⁶ False fingerings are the alternate fingering choices used to vary the tone color, which is similar to playing the same note on different strings of a bowed instrument.

appointed professor of musical analysis at the Conservatory of Bordeaux in 1993. From 2004 to 2007, he was artistic director of the *Orchestre National Bordeaux Aquitaine*, and later he was appointed composer-in-residence at the Thirty-sixth Festival of Music on Sky Cordes-sur-Ciel (Tarn) in 2007.⁷ In a dissertation by Po-Yuan Ku, *Four Recitals and an Essay: Christian Lauba and His Saxophone Etudes: From an Historical Perspective* (2009), Ku observes that:

Christian Lauba's music....constantly presents two opposing elements simultaneously, either an immobile surface superimposed on an active interior or agitated phrasing, with a flowing, slow pulse. (Ku 2009, 59)

Lauba was commissioned by Jean-Marie Londeix, the professor of saxophone at the Conservatory of Bordeaux, to write etudes for the saxophone in 1992. Lauba spent the next two years working closely with Londeix on the project.⁸ The outcome was a set of nine etudes, divided into four volumes, with each etude focused on one or more extended techniques for the saxophone. It was during the period of writing these etudes that Lauba composed *Steady Study on the Boogie* (1993) for French saxophonist Jean-Yves Fourmeau. Similar to the 12-bar blues improvisation, this piece is an etude based on the boogie rhythm. Lauba brings out the harmony through careful choice and use of multiphonics. He also explores in depth extended techniques such as slap-tongue, bisbigliando, and circular-breathing.

⁷ Jean-Marie Londeix, *A Comprehensive Guide to the Saxophone Repertoire 1844–2003*. (New Jersey: Roncorp, Inc., 2003), 220.

⁸ Christian Lauba, e-mail message to the author, January 20th, 2012.

Ku observes that “inheriting the tradition from the French composer, Maurice Ravel, Christian Lauba wants his compositions to be performed and interpreted with precision and clarity” (Ku 2009, 61). According to Lauba, “What I am talking about is clarity of language and not necessarily clarity of timbre. *Clear* for me, in this sense, means that the performer is to meticulously and clearly represent everything that is notated in the score” (Umble 2000, 257). Similar to his requirement on performing his etudes for saxophone, a performer attempting to perform *Steady Study on the Boogie* must first study the language of the boogie rhythm, understand the 12-bar blues form, and interpret the musical notation precisely. As one of the longest and most challenging pieces ever written for saxophone by Lauba, the performer needs to have great concentration while performing the piece.

Another challenge when performing this piece is to handle the page turns of the music score. *Steady Study on the Boogie* is 18 pages long, and the performer is playing almost continuously using both hands throughout the piece. A careful planning of page turns is required. Other options include minimizing the size of the music score in order to avoid frequent page turns, or to memorize certain sections or the entire piece.

Mysterious Morning III for soprano saxophone by Fuminori Tanada (b.1961)

Born in Okayama, Japan, Fuminori Tanada studied composition and accompaniment from 1979 to 1983 at the Tokyo University of the Arts (formerly known as Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music) with Yoshio Hachimura and Henriette Puig-Roget. From 1984 to 1987, he studied at the Paris Conservatory, where he

received first prizes for composition, orchestration, and accompaniment. During his stay in Paris, he was in the classes of Claude Ballif, Paul Méfano, Serge Nigg, and Betsy Jolas.⁹

Mysterious Morning III was composed in 1996, commissioned by French saxophonist Claude Delangle. Tanada composed his first *Mysterious Morning* in 1995, followed by a series of four works written during the subsequent two years with the same generic name, but with different instrumental combinations. The *Mysterious Morning I* (1995) was written for harp, *Mysterious Morning II* (1996) for saxophone quartet, and *Mysterious Morning IV* (1996–1997) for two harps and an ensemble. *Mysterious Morning III* (1996) for the solo soprano saxophone incorporates extended techniques such as bisbigliando, multiphonics, micro-intervals, and glissandi.

Joseph Stevenson lists on the *Allmusic* website that the inspiration for this work comes from French composers and theorists Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail and jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker. Grisey and Murail are often associated with the “spectral” approach or technique of composition, which involves the use of the fundamental and overtones as a basis for generating melody and harmony. Murail explained that sound creates a sense that deserves its own unique appreciation, rather than being described by its dynamic, pitch, length or timbre (Murail 2005, 122). As Murail notes:

It is more realistic, more in keeping with physical reality and perception, to consider a sound as a field of forces, each force pursuing its own particular evolution.... It allows us also to develop a

⁹ Jean-Marie Londeix, *A Comprehensive Guide to the Saxophone Repertoire 1844–2003*. (New Jersey: Roncorp, Inc., 2003), 368.

compositional technique based on the analysis of sounds. (Murail 2005, 122)

For *Mysterious Morning III*, it is important that the performer focus on the sense created by the sound itself. Tanada gave very specific instructions on what he wants the performer to achieve. A lexicon is provided with terms describing goals to achieve it, such as *rapide* (fast), *nerveux* (nervous), *instable* (uneven), *fluctuant* (fluctuating), *inquiet détaché* (anxious staccato), *lointain* (far off), *court et haletant* (short, panting), *mystérieux* (mysterious), and *de plus en plus de souffle et détimbré* (more and more breathy and colourless).

Tanada also specified that the piece should be played continuously, giving the impression of a wild saxophonist nervously improvising, playing anxiously. As suggested by Stevenson on the *Allmusic* website, “this does not imply that the work is an attempt of jazz, rather it is Parker’s improvisatory freedom and stretching of playing techniques that Tanada aimed for.” Therefore, the performer must find a balance between showcasing technique and the rhythm of the piece, especially when there are breathing marks indicated in the music.

Terra Nemo for baritone saxophone by Piotr Grella-Możejko (b.1961)

Piotr Grella-Możejko is an Edmonton based Canadian-Polish composer and multimedia performer. He holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and a M.Mus. in composition from the University of Alberta. He studied with Alfred Fisher, Henry Klumpenhouwer, Christopher Lewis, Edward Boguslawski and Boguslaw Schaeffer. His works have been performed in thirty countries on five continents, including commissions

through the Canada Council for the Arts, Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Edmonton Arts Council, Canadian Music Centre, Flanders Festival and the Ministry of Culture and Arts (Poland). Grella-Mozejko has published in many major scholarly and popular periodicals, including the “Canadian Slavonic Papers,” “Contemporary Music Review,” “MusicWorks,” and “The Alberta New Music and Arts Review.” Grella-Mozejko hosts his own show on CJSR Radio in Edmonton, “Avant-garde and Beyond,” which is available on the World Wide Web.¹⁰

Grella-Mozejko says that:

Commissioned by Chee Meng Low, *Terra Nemo* is a highly virtuosic and technically challenging piece that incorporates such extended techniques as circular-breathing, growling effects, quarter-tone tuning, alternate fingerings, irregular and erratic rhythms. These technical demands serve one purpose only: to create a world of expressive and emotive strangeness, “otherness”, the world of expression removed from that usually associated with the instrument, albeit not devoid of humour.¹¹

The unusual style of the piece lends itself well to illustrating “a drunken” Chinese martial arts term, *Zui quan* (醉拳). *Zui quan* is a style of martial arts that appear to imitate a drunk person’s movements, which often involved a great command of irregular and unpredictable body movements. Similar to *zui quan*, a performer attempting to perform *Terra Nemo* will require great technical control on the long sustained phrases, while maintaining a balance between the fast irregular rhythms and the long lyrical quarter-tone phrase. The piece also features a wide range of dynamics from *ppp* to *ffffz*, and extreme

¹⁰ Piotr Grella-Mozejko, e-mail message to the author, November 15th, 2013.

¹¹ Ibid.

high notes on the baritone saxophone. Suggested by the composer, the plate (reverb) and autopan plug-ins were used to affect the recorded digital signal, to highlight the expressive qualities and the emotional impact of the piece.¹²

Strata for tenor saxophone by Colin Labadie (b.1984)

Colin Labadie is a Kitchener-Waterloo based composer and performer. He is a doctoral degree candidate in composition at the University of Alberta, with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Often involving a wide range of influences and interdisciplinary collaboration, Labadie has built or modified many instruments for his work. His works has been performed by New York New Music Ensemble, Arraymusic, NODUS Ensemble, QUASAR Saxophone Quartet, Penderecki String Quartet, Kathryn Ladano and Richard Burrows, Enterprise Quartet, University of Alberta Symphony Orchestra and Saxophone Quartet, Roger Admiral, Allison Balcetis, Chelsea Shanoff, Laura Jordan, Lisa Cella, and Robert Bekkers. The Canadian University Music Society's Student Composer competition has recently awarded him a top prize for his string quartet piece *Elusions*.¹³

Commissioned by Allison Balcetis, *Strata* is in a minimalist style, incorporating the altissimo range and multiphonics effects. Labadie says that:

Strata is the first in a series of pieces in which I combine simple layers (strata) of material to create complex textures. I was particularly inspired by the music of extreme metal band Meshuggah, which

¹² Piotr Grella-Możejko, e-mail message to the author, December 17th, 2013.

¹³ Colin Labadie, "About Colin Labadie" *Colin Labadie*, accessed October 28th, 2013, <http://www.colinlabadie.com/about.html>.

contains dizzying rhythmic and metric patterns that push the listener's threshold of perception, without sounding overly technical or contrived. I was also inspired by the great bebop saxophonists, whose extended solos had an energy and intensity that I've always found mesmerizing and surreal.¹⁴

Labadie indicated in the music score that the tempo should be fast but comfortable. The performer is required to perform at a level of high energy and attack the written accents aggressively. At the same time, the performer should bring out the dynamic contrast of the accented notes and the slur or smoothness of all non-accented notes. A consistent metric beat is required throughout the piece, especially in the last section where the accented notes evolve to accented multiphonics.

Conclusion

All the composers involved in this recording project are still alive and actively engaged in the art and craft of composition. These pieces were chosen not only to hone the skills of contemporary techniques, but the entire project was carefully designed to confirm the position of the saxophone in the world of contemporary music. Marcel Mule, the first saxophone professor at the Paris Conservatoire, once wrote to his student Jean-Marie Londeix, "The saxophone....is made to sing. You are wrong to distance yourself from the traditional classical repertoire to this degree" (Umble 2000, 102). Later on, Jean-Marie Londeix wrote in his reply to Mule "The saxophone's only hope for a place in 'serious' music is through modern music, where it is often irreplaceable" (Umble 2000, 108).

¹⁴ Colin Labadie, e-mail message to the author, October 27th, 2013.

The saxophone, an invented instrument, has a short history compared to other musical instruments. Saxophonists do not have the luxury of performing the music created by skillful composers of the past. However, we are free and able to develop the instrument's idiomatic characteristics and voice in the contemporary music scene. Today's musicians must embrace the contemporary music and prepare ourselves for the artistic and technical requirements of the next generation. The future of the saxophone relies on the collaboration between the composers and performers, who serve the cultures of today's world.

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