

Claude Dauphin

## **THE AESTHETICAL MOVEMENT OF CLASSICAL MUSIC COMPOSITION IN HAITI**

The origin of this tradition dates from 18<sup>th</sup> century, when this Caribbean territory, located a few kilometers from Cuba, was a French colony named St-Domingue. After having eliminated the indigenous populations of this island, the European deported millions of Black Africans and held them in slavery. The rest of the population included white French colonial, a class of mixed natives from French and Africans, finally by a small number of free Blacks persons who own their freedom for various reasons.

The musical environment necessarily reflected this mix of populations coming from Europe and Africa. The music of the Africans was connected first with the voodoo religion, whose songs accompanied by drum contributed to lead the believers into a trance.

For his part, the French music was based on theater, ballet, and opera where works of Duni, Grétry, and Rameau were regularly performed in front of a White People audience, but also in the presence of the other categories of the population, even that of domestic slaves who had the duty to accompany their masters. The diversity of the population was quickly shifted towards musical styles. Thus, appeared local genres as Creole operas and instrumental music that translated this taste for dance so important in French opera and in African celebrations.

## Overview of scholarly music in the American continent a in the Caribbean island

The awakening of nationalism<sup>1</sup> that marked European musical composition throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not fail to have its repercussions in North, Central and South America. In Mexico, beside the name of Manuel Ponce (1882-1948), José Rolón (1883-1945) we should remind the name of Carlos Chavez (1899-1978) the most influent Mexican composer in 20<sup>th</sup> century which combine modernism with folk inspiration. Brazil has contributed to this movement through the works of Ernesto Nazareth (1863-1934), Heitor Villa-Lobos (Brazil, 1887-1959), Francisco Braga (1868-1945) and his disciple Cecilda Borges Barbosa (1914-2010). In French-Canada, between others, we should retain the name of Claude Champagne (1891-1965) author of a *Gaspesian Symphony* on popular airs of this Quebec region. Among many Americans inspired by traditional music, I retain as most original Louis-Moreau Gottschalk (Louisiana, 1829-1869) inspired by Antillean dances, but who was considered at his time as a rival of Franz Liszt for his pianistic virtuosity, Charles Ives (1874-1954) and Aaron Copland (1900-1990).

A glance at African Americans also reminds us of the search for popular musical idioms in the very well shaped musical sonatas and other chamber pieces by Florence Price (1888-1953), in the black history inspiration by Clarence Cameroun White (1880-1960) or William Grant Still (1895-1978), who wrote an *Afro-American Symphony* (1930) and even an opera concerned by Haitian history, *Troubled Island*, on a libretto by Langston Hughes completed by Verna Arvey, the composer's wife. The same manner can also be found in the Canadian African American works by Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943). These relatively well-known names, however, refer mainly to composers who have worked on the continent.

But what about the disciples of Liszt, Chopin, Grieg, Dvořák and Smetana in the Caribbean archipelago? Simultaneously with the action of Bartók and

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1 I specify that this Nationalism to which I refer is related to the normative meaning used in musicology to talk about music composition, performance, repertoire, music publishing, and music education, all those facts considered as "active contribution to the formation of a national identity". So, I use this term without any connection with supranationalist ideologies practiced at different times, in different countries.

Kodály of which many of them were contemporaries, they built an original heritage which worth a musical stopover in the tropical islands of the Americas.

A quick overview would take us to Cuba, whose rich School of National Composition is based on foundations that date back to an organized practice of musical creation since the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the cathedrals of Santiago and Havana. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by excellent composers such as Manuel Saumell (1818-1870), whom I like to call the Cuban Schubert, for this blend of melody and harmony so delicately characteristic and so original. This is also the case of Ignacio Cervantes (1847-1905). They spread a whole line of successors during the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Alejandro García Caturla (1906-1940), Amadeo Roldán (1900-1939) who are pure geniuses cut before the age of 40 like Mozart or Schubert.

Nevertheless, it was in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a musical aesthetic dedicated to the piano, intended for indoor concerts and inspired by local dances as Chopin did in Poland and Liszt in Hungary, was confirmed. One name dominates all attempts in this genre, that of Edmond Saintonge (1861-1907) whom I consider as the inventor of concert meringue. Four of these Meringues dances were published in Vienna, by Kratochwill editions in 1884. So, Saintonge can be considered as the precursor of what is known as the National School of Musical Composition of Haiti.

## **Aesthetics of Musical Composition in Haiti**

The first era of the National School of Musical Composition in Haiti which I will introduce to brought together five composers. Justin Élie (1883-1931), Ludovic Lamothe (1882-1953), Werner Jaegerhuber (1900-1953), Frantz Casséus (1915-1993), Carmen Brouard (1909-2005). Each of them wanted to make their compositions dedicated to classical art music concert inspired by the Haitian native culture. To reach this goal they choose the ancestral African Voodoo religion and mythology as an overdeterminant reference of their identity. I will demonstrate how this aesthetic goal has been translated into art music.

## Justin Élie (1883-1931)

Native of Cap-Haïtien, Justin Élie moved to Paris in his childhood with his parents. Although there is no evidence that he studied at the Paris Conservatoire, it is at least certain that he was a private pupil of Antonin Marmontel, for composition, and of Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot, for piano, both professors at the famous Parisian institution. Returned to Haiti in 1905, Justin Élie undertook an examination of the musical structures present in the Haitian folklore. Although he showed a deep interest in the voodoo mythology from which he drew an idiom that would represent his nationality in classical music. For example, he showed interest on the zombi's legends, a fairly widespread story about the undead persons that fascinates even the imagination of children as shown in a children song entitled *Zonbi bann mannan*. In his *Haytian Legend*, a piece for violin and piano, Élie use this simple motive of the children rhyme as a central theme. This childish rhyme is developed as a strette motive quotation in the *Haytian Legend* a piece for violin and piano by Élie. The concert piece, inspired by this children rhyme, begins with a long and melancholic meditation a manner to remind that these zombie tales is told at the nightfall when we can observe the starry sky and watch for the appearance of the shooting star (represented by a violin's glissando), which is an humorous allusion of the alleged truth of the story<sup>2</sup>. After this mysterious largo given as first part of the piece arose the legend of the zombies accounted with the child's song collected by the composer. The score of Élie's *Haytian Legend* was published by Carl Fisher, New York in 1922. This violin and piano piece, *Haytian Legend* by Élie, is with his *Five Meringues for piano* and his *Tropical Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra are the composer's most renowned pieces. The repertoire bequeathed by Justin Élie is vast and diverse. It includes chamber music, piano music, some lieder on French and Creole poems, but especially lot of symphonic poems, many of which were played in the silent movies and which were very successful in the United States in their time.

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<sup>2</sup> This representative feature of popular Haitian peasant thought is equivalent to the Hungarian peasant belief that sneezing is a sign of the falsity of a testimony. Hence the simulation of a loud sneeze by the chromatic strings rise followed by the explosion of the full orchestra at the beginning of the *Prelude of Hány János* by Zoltán Kodály.

## **Ludovic Lamothe (1882-1953)**

Born in Port-au-Prince, Ludovic Lamothe grew up in a family where music and poetry reigned thanks to his mother Virginie Sampeur, poet and pianist. Known as « The Black Chopin and the Last one of the Romantics » as the Russian cellist Bogumil Zykora (1884-1953) surnamed him after a concert where they played together in 1939, Ludovic Lamothe, dedicated almost his entirely work to the piano inspired by a poetic spleen associated with Caribbean dances like habanera and other Cuban danzas as well as Haitian meringue a similarity with the mazurkas, polonaises and waltz in Chopin's works. This similarity is justified also by the richness of the harmony and the free arabesque style of Lamothe compositions. It is important also to mention the Lamothe interest for the carnival dances where the sexualized exhibition is in fact an expression of the anguish of the death. This dialectic of Eros and Thanatos behind the antics, jokes and funnies of carnival dances keeps Lamothe's music "far away of the opium of the dance" as would say the musical aesthetician Theodor Adorno<sup>3</sup>. I am thinking of *Nibo*, composed in 1936, a special piece, repetitive and minimalist evoking the eponym voodoo god in a carnival merengue as a typical example of the Lamothe's tragic conception of Haitian Carnival Dance.

## **Werner Jaegerhuber (1900-1953)**

Werner Jaegerhuber whose name with a German consonance reveals the origin of his father married to a Haitian, was born in Port-au-Prince, capital of Haiti. He studied at the Conservatory of Music in Hamburg and taught in several musical institutions of the Hanseatic metropolis during the interwar period before returning to his native country in 1934. He is the one who developed a more systematic approach according to the ethnographic principles in force at his time. Each air collected in situ is noted and described on a field card. In the manner of Kodály and Bartók, he used these popular melodies, essentially that of voodoo, the ancestral religion brought by the Africans deported in slavery in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, to draw the profile of his

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3 Theodor Adorno, *Le caractère fétiche dans la musique*, Paris, Éditions Allia, 2001, p. 27 sq.

works: symphonies, chamber music, oratorios, operas, accompanied melodies. By instance, this invocation of the Voodoo god Danmbala which he collected from the informant Voodoo-priest Libéra Bordereau before inserted it in a cycle of 24 creole lieder entitled *Voodoo Offerings*. In the same way, he used these same pagan tunes to compose a majestic Latin mass entitled *Mass on Voodoo the Airs* or more discreetly *Haitian folk mass*. This mass, one of major work by the composer, was composed in the precedent year for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Haitian independence happened on 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1954. This concert mass for soprano soloist, choir and organ was effectively first executed at this date under the direction of Maria Éthéart (1901-1989) the first women conducted a such important musical work in Haiti. The ecumenical significance of this mass has been recognized by several Catholic bishops who supported its execution from various churches around the world during the celebrations of the Bicentenary of Haiti's independence in 2004<sup>4</sup>.

### **Frantz Casséus (1915-1993)**

Born in Port-au-Prince, Frantz Casséus is generally considered a self-taught musician. But, to saying this is not to taking account of the guidance given to him by Werner Jaegerhuber who introduced him to solfeggio and musical writing and made him discover and work on J. S. Bach's suites for solo cello transposed on guitar. Also places voodoo inspiration at the heart of his compositions but in a more idyllic, a more pastoral, a more rural mode. Of his works composed first for the classical guitar, his favorite instrument, there are also versions for piano or for various chamber formations, made by himself or by other composers. Let us consider the "Yanvalloux", and the "Coumbite" respectively second movement and 4<sup>th</sup> movement of his *Haitian Suite*, published by Ricordi in 1956. "Yanvalloux" pictured a sacred dance of Voodoo dedicated to the snake god Danmbala where the dancer moves his shoulders for simulating and acting the snake. As result, the Casseus' musical piece is based on a fluid, undulating, sinuous and tortuous rhythm in a 6/8 metric which fits perfectly to the idea of flexibility that the Yanvalou

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4 Cf: Robert Grenier and Claude Dauphin, « Werner Jaegerhuber's *Messe sur les airs vodouesques*: The Inculturation of Vodou in a Catholic Mass », dans *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 29 No 1, p. 51-82, Chicago College, 2009.

means. “Coumbite”, the last movement of the *Haitian Suite* evokes an assembly of companions for executing the peasant field labour. The predominant and syncopated accompaniment of this piece is a support for the alternative action of the hoe on the earth. This “Coumbite” melody has been later extracted from the instrumental suite to make a song on a creole poem by Casseus entitled “Merci Bon Dieu”, a true Thank Giving hymn which became a popular song, quasi a folksong, after the Afro-American pop-singer Harry Belafonte adopted it as the hit of his world musical tour with the composer’s participation in 1956. This world success happening confirms the Casseus talent to compose melodies in the true popular vein creating a sort of personal folklore. Casséus’ accompanied melodies also represent an interesting part of his works. His most decisive vocal cycle is certainly that entitled *Haitiennesques*, a collection of 4 melodies published in New York by Franco Colombo Publications in 1969.

### **Carmen Brouard (1909-2005)**

The Haitian women composer Carmen Brouard was born in Port-au-Prince. As a child, she received her first piano lessons from Justin Élie and his wife Émilie Price. In her twenties, she travels in Paris where she studied under direction of Marguerite Long and of the French pianist of Hungarian origin Isidore Philipp at the Normal School of Music founded by Alfred Cortot. In 1955, at the age of 46, she completed her last study internship in France in composition with Georges Hugon, professor of harmony at the Conservatoire de Paris. Back in Haiti, she puts herself in the perspective of the Indigenous movement whose her brother Carl Brouard represents the prominent poet. Alongside her intimist and introspective lieder and her instrumental music for chamber ensemble or orchestra, she develops a contrasting dialogue of European musical structures with rhythms and scales idioms from Haitian traditional Voodoo music. Brouard’s vocal music draws its poetic inspiration from various cultures. Apart from her preference for French or Haitian poets writing in French (Carl Brouard, Gary Klang, Nadine Magloire), she has developed cycles of melodies with piano or orchestra based on the Persian poet Omar Khayyam, the Hindu spiritualist poets Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranth Tagore, the Quebec poet Émile Nelligan, the

Quebec drama Michel Garneau and the US poet Walt Whitman. Carmen Brouard bequeathed to the Haitian musical heritage a collection of works based on Voodoo spirituality: *Nights under the Haitian arbour*, a sonata for two pianos (1969-1970); *Baron La Croix*, a symphonic poem for piano and orchestra (1979); *Negro-Sonata* (1988) for piano solo; *Contra-Folk*, for violin, cello and piano (1988); *Haiti... Magic Island* (1992). Inside the generous repertoire of instrumental chamber musical by Carmen Brouard I retain her *Voodoo Sonata* for violin and piano (1966) as the most representative of her dialectic style opposing the diatonic, polytonal western musical languages to pentatonic, modal or polymodal scales of African provenance flourished in the voodoo music in Haiti. After the first performance of this *Voodoo Sonata* in Port-au-Prince in 1966 by the Haitian violinist Fritz Benjamin and pianist Micheline Laudun Denis, the writer Roger Gaillard published a famous article so well entitled “The Haitian soul in a sonata” which resume perfectly the musical aesthetic of Carmen Brouard.

## Conclusion

Thus, this first era of the National School of Classical Composition of Haiti has truly innovated by raising the collective culture as the supreme identity emblem among Haitian creators. Its example has since spread to all artistic practices. In this way, it ensured a sustainability whose foundations were patiently built for an entire century: from the return to Haiti of Justin Élie in 1905 to the death of Carmen Brouard in 2005. Articulated in this first wave, two other generations of composers have worked and still work around the principle of Haitian ethnocultural roots and its inspiration ensuring the sustainability of this movement until today. A complete study on Haitian music and presentation of the composers belonging to the National School of Classical Composition of Haiti can be find in the book entitled *Histoire du style musical d’Haïti*<sup>5</sup>.

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5 Claude Dauphin, *Histoire du style musical d’Haïti*, Montréal, Éditions Mémoire d’encrier, 2014.