

# Interpreting Milhaud's *Suite Française*

Tim Reynish

## Interpreting and Editing

Many orchestral players will remember those editions of the classical repertoire heavily edited by 19th century Conductors, or even by Beecham and Wood in this, full of additional phrasing and dynamics, making Mozart and Haydn sound like Mendelssohn and Berlioz.

Ideally, phrasing and balance should be a natural part of the conductor's technique. If they have a group which rehearses regularly and is sensitive to the requirements of playing solo, blending, accompanying, and if the players are expert enough to have sorted out the intonation problems, and the relative strengths of their instruments depending on the tessitura, then the conductor can develop a language of gesture which can tell the orchestra or band a lot of the information which is not on the page and which they have acquired through experience of the composer's other works, from other composers, from the art, architecture and literature of the period. Our experience-providing research is a never-ending quest.

The *Suite Française* of Milhaud has always been regarded as one of the masterpieces of the wind band repertoire, but how many satisfactory performances have we heard? I always suspected that it was one of those 'masterpieces' like the Beethoven *Horn Sonata*; this is a really quite weak work which we revere because it is almost the only classical sonata for the instrument and because it is by Beethoven. It is quite hard to make the original band version of the Milhaud 'work'; it is heavily scored, with six saxophones including Bass thickening up already muddy textures, and yet the original songs and Milhaud's own tunes have a wit, elegance and charm rare in wind band performances. It is an excellent piece as a basis for serious discussion about the role of the players, whether they are *accompagnato*, whether they have important but subsidiary roles or whether they are solo - and how solo are the solos?

There is no 'right' way to interpret, but I try to give each phrase and each accompaniment its own strong character - the following ideas might give rise to other, different ideas on phrasing and balance in particular

## Normandie

Bar 1: I like to have the oboes dominating the clarinets and cornet (try to persuade your brass that they are there to support, except for the really big moments when they add the excitement that the wind cannot offer). Make sure that the dotted crotchets are tenuto and the rest of the accompaniment shorter and always light. Phrase up to, and away from, second beat of third bar, while the quavers in low wind and horns take over for two beats. Bar 5-8: I would start the phrasing crescendo late and lead into bar 9. Bars 9-10: *poco forte* for saxophones and trumpet, phrased away. Bars 11-13: *poco piu forte* phrased away, while the moving parts again crescendo. Bars 14-15 & 16-17: aim at the accents, *piu forte* the second bars and *diminuendo* in 19 into the saxophones and horns who also *diminuendo* elegantly in 21. Make very sure that the *appoggiaturas* in 21 are very strong and just before the beat - not everyone has them.

Bars 23-26: A typical 4 bar phrase, peaking either on 3rd or 4th bar, 1st beat, or perhaps

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for fun the second beat of the 3rd bar, with a steep *diminuendo* to a *poco mf* for the start of the crescendo in 27. Bars 31-32: I ask the flutes and clarinets to make a little crescendo as they descend; curiously the orchestral version has no *diminuendo* in 33 and 34, but it is neat and sets up the *subito forte* in horns and cornets. Their tune has been heard many times before, so the little counter-melody in 27 might perhaps be favoured, but in any case sustain up to 42.

At 43, the low wind and trombones often make their accompanying figure rather legato. I like the Revelli point that notes should not quite touch, so prefer it *poco marcato*. The orchestral version has pizzicato strings with a little emphasis on 2nd beat of 44 and 46, so - keep it light and clear. Phrase 49 through to the accented second beat. The 6 bar phrase from 53 builds naturally as more instruments enter, but phrase away in 58, to the new idea. Perhaps this might weaken on each repetition, giving prominence to the clarinet and horn entry on the wrong beat of the bar - invite the players to play as if they

were on the 1st not second beat with the original phrasing. At 71, similar treatment of the two tunes, and at 79 take care not to be too noisy and that the second entry of the canon is stronger than the first, and I like a big, late crescendo in 82 into the final statement of the theme. Bars 83-101: Keep the general dynamic a light, not heavy *fortissimo*, keep the phrasing clear, and then invite the heavy brass to play a full *ff* for their final entries from the upbeat to 102, ending on a 'high'.

## Bretagne

This is probably technically the hardest movement to play, with very low dynamics and strange phrasing. Though Milhaud wrote this in America, perhaps he was thinking of the thinner sound of French bassoons and French Horns at the start. Encourage the bassoons and later low brass to be *espressivo* at their little two bar tag, and balance the saxophones and horns carefully in 7-9. It is worth remembering that the middle and low registers do not 'speak' easily, and it is essential to project thematic material.

The little oboe tune from 12 is in a five bar or even two 2 1/2 bar phrases; I encourage the soloist to take a breath after the first note of bar 14. It is easy too for the muted trombones to be too quiet in this section; when joined by the muted horn in 22, take care of the balance and ask them to give a cry of agony. The theme from the upbeat to 27 is also in 2 1/2 bar phrases, and again I encourage the players to make this strange phrasing very clear. The original folk song for this section is in simple time, and it changes the feel if the players are thinking in crotchet beats instead of dotted crotchets, I find it flows with more purpose. Throughout the movement, ask the players to take greatest care of the *appoggiaturas*.

## Ile de France

Here my plea for the wind band to play lightly in *forte* is of paramount importance; those repeated quavers can be so heavy, so ask the horns and trombones to make their entry and then remember that they are *accompagnato* from the end of bar 2. The phrasing in the original folk-tune is again in five, and I ask the players to accent the first crotchet, lighten the top D on the second beat, emphasise the accent on the last beat, but lighten the first beat of bar 4, repeating this phrasing from the second beat of bar 4.

Dynamics in this movement are hard; the

*mf* in bar 8 will be very light, the *forte* in 12 a little stronger, and the *fortissimo* in the low brass, saxophones and horns must be treated with greatest caution, or else we cannot hear the piccolo and oboes who are also marked *fortissimo*.

Again from bar 20, balance the canon very carefully so that we hear the bitonality clearly, A major and D major. From 25 the main theme is extremely difficult to phrase, especially hard is the articulation in 26, and this is one of the reasons that I take this movement a little steadier than the metronome mark, so that I can try to play this theme, and that little virtuoso tag at 49/50 with elegance and charm. I invite the players to give a lot of brilliance to the *forte* in 39/40 as a sharp contrast to the lyrical theme again. 45 need not be too loud, since the wind are quite high, but the little tag at 49/50 must be only *mf*, with a charming *diminuendo* to show how easy it was. The *rit* in 58 is only 3 beats at most, so I pull back a little earlier from 57, go into 4, and then pick up on the quaver upbeats. At the end, keep reminding everyone of the 5/4 phrasing, and sustain the *fortissimo* with a *crescendo*.

### Alsace-Lorraine

Here I invite the players to remember Revelli's admonition, quoted by Jim Croft, that notes should not quite touch. This for me is a funeral march, and I need clarity, Alfred Reed's *clari-ty*, especially in the moving crotchets and minims. Invite the players to sing out these agonising songs, usually in 8 bar phrases.

The really difficult task for us as conductors is to control the end. The players see *ff* at 81 and that is the last dynamic for 29 slow bars. Ask them to make it a really small *fortissimo*, to sing out the little *gruppettos* of demi-semiquavers (why can't we call them 32nd notes?) above a very controlled accompaniment, and invite the brass particularly to hold back until the accents in the last seven bars. We discussed the horrors of Private Ryan, and tried to build a really scary climax.

### Provence

Again, I am too steady whenever I conduct this, so that the players can concentrate on very clear articulation and again perhaps over-elegant phrasing, in bar 2,

bar 6, 11 and 14, each slightly different. With so much spiky music, I ask the wind and brass to play *tenuto forte* in 27/28, and then we need to be careful with the balance of the euphonium from 29, quite low, against most of the tutti high woodwind. 35 is a grandiose pullback which I subdivide, asking the players to play each note longer, not just slower, and not too much so that it could be bigger the second time. From 36 I always have to work hard at the lightness, the articulation and phrasing, and from 50 again the balance is crucial. I always feel that the coda section from 79 is a little perfunctory so I try to build a really grandiose last five bars, but from 79 there are balance problems again, the little Latin American woodwind phrase, the horn theme and the brass, clarinets and saxophones, all need to be extremely carefully balanced in a less than *fortissimo* dynamic so that the detail can be heard, rather than noise.

For the information on the folksongs, I am hugely indebted to Robert Garofalo's superb book on the original inspiration behind the Suite. Published by Meredith Music, Bob's research is essential reading for anyone who is attempting to conduct the work.

## NOTES