

Prélude, Cadence et Finale

(1956) (11')

for

Alto Saxophone and Piano

by

Alfred Desenclos (1912-1971)

Editions Leduc

Prélude, Cadence et Finale was commissioned by the Paris Conservatory for the school's 1956 year-end saxophone *concours*. The composer viewed this work as a "suite" in three connected movements. This serious, well-written triptych showcases the expressive and virtuosic possibilities of the traditional classical saxophone.

The composer, who disliked simplistic virtuosic writing, avoided writing shallow acrobatic displays of virtuosity and conventional patterns of technique while still attempting to musically accommodate general guidelines usually associated with the *morceau de concours*.³⁴¹ The work can be thought of as being somewhat related conceptually to Franck's *Prélude, Aria et Final*, *The Well-Tempered Clavier* by Bach, and Mendelssohn's *Sonata in F*.³⁴² Moreover, Desenclos, shared with his elders Gabriel Fauré and Debussy a serious, dignified, and reserved nature, a penchant for spirituality, and a preference for substantial, highly thought-out music. He seemed to have preferred writing music that expressed that which was deeply felt as opposed to that which was clearly stated.

Perhaps the composer's desire to escape what Berlioz called the "vain striving for purity of style and form" is the reason he added modal instability to this triptych by using the chord spelled C#-E-G-Bb-D-F as the underlying harmony, as well as in employing ambiguous tonality (for example, the first theme, first measure in the *Prelude*), and unexpected resolutions (found, for example, in the third theme, composed of vigorous, brassy chords in the piano cadenza found on page four, last line, first measure of the piano part). Another example of ambiguous tonality is found in the fourth theme, where the harmony alternates between a diminished seventh and minor seventh with diminished fifth, found on page five of the piano part, first line, third measure and following (the "rêveur," or "dreamy" theme, as the composer called it).

Additionally, the work is marked by rhythmic ambiguity, as, for example, the quartuplets in first theme are often juxtaposed with triplets, and, in the finale, where the lyrical phrases are simultaneously composed of both ternary and binary metric groupings.

This deliberate avoidance of clarity is a similar approach to that of Marcel Gromaire, another northern French artist of the same generation as Desenclos, whose works exhibit a similar preference for ambiguous forms and colors, such as brown and sepia.

My Ideas Regarding the Interpretation of This Work

The first section includes two kinds of preludes:

1. "Tuning prelude." fourteen bars in length, which resembles an improvisation based on the fundamental harmony of the piece (a *Prelude-Fantasy*)

³⁴¹ The typically "Parisian" *concours* piece generally focuses on pedagogy while emphasizing technique, lyrical phrasing (both slow and fast movements), articulation (slurred and staccato), and the use of all registers.

³⁴² Londeix elaborated that having an aural awareness of these works is helpful for gaining insight into subtle stylistic elements typical of Desenclos' work.

2. Thematic introduction (a Prelude-Overture)

The opening section of the prelude is reminiscent of Bach because of its free and flexible style. It is characterized by its brevity and by the agogic flexibility of the notated harmonic-melodic curves. The indicated tempo (60 = dotted quarter note), seems to be too fast if one wants to adhere to the *grave* character of the piece, especially at the very beginning, (a section reminiscent of the style of the opening toccata of certain traditional pieces, for example, Bach's *Tocatta, Adagio et Fugue*, BWV 564). I prefer to start the piece at the tempo of 56 to the dotted quarter instead. This allows for the introduction of a graceful and imperceptible agogic movement in the melodic arabesques. Be sure to remember that the G, played by the piano in the first bars, is the fundamental of the chord that is subsequently melodically developed by the saxophone, therefore do not separate the second note—low B on the saxophone—from the fundamental preceding it. Also, be careful not to attack the low B too harshly, as it is the *second* note of the chord. Indeed, play this in the same manner as does the pianist in bar 16 and as well at eight bars before the *Cadence*.

The second part of the *Prélude*, (bar 15) is developed by the saxophone. It begins with a lyrical phrase to be played at a tempo of dotted quarter = 60, and is more assertive and more rhythmically stable in comparison to the opening. The phrase is shaped by several crescendos and diminuendos, beginning from *pp* in the saxophone (presentation of the theme by the piano, bar 15) up to an insistent *f* (high F, next to last line of the first page in the saxophone part), then starts to diminuendo two bars later (not before), and thus returning to the initial *pp* (eight bars before the cadence). There, the piano repeats the opening chord at the original tempo.

In order to create the theme's desired dark and expressive timbre (the theme being richly stated by the saxophone in measures 19 and following) as well as the low contralto roundness that this dramatic phrase seems to need (such as is typically found singing Carmen's role in Bizet's opera), play by lowering the chin without reducing the firmness of the lips at the corners in order to produce as many of the low harmonics as is possible. Moreover, respect the perfect regularity of the two successive four-note groups in rhythmic opposition with the piano's triplets without using a vulgar rubato, which would destroy the subtle opposition between binary and ternary as well as the phrase's intended simplicity. This is also characteristic of the music of Claude Debussy. Other observations: breathe after the F at the beginning of the seventh line rather than two bars before, in the middle of the melisma. This will facilitate a more effective *sostenuto* in this lyrical melody. Open the throat, without loosening the embouchure, in order to perfectly slur the wide descending lyrical major seventh intervals in the 27th and 28th bars, thus making them eloquent and vibrant.

These two types of preludes, Prelude-Fantasy and Prelude-Overture, announce the tonality and the primary themes of the two subsequent cadenzas, played first by the saxophone, then by the piano.

Note: in the sixth bar from the beginning, the last note played by the saxophone is an Eb (this must be corrected in the first edition). Also, the G's played in the third bar of the sixth line should be G#'s.

The second section, *Cadence*, is actually shared by both instrumentalists. The first half is given to the saxophone (page 2), and it is in three distinct sections. The first part, a free variation of the prelude theme, starts very softly. The intensity progressively grows, developing the *grave*, serious, and classical character of this music. The rhythm is clearly notated and its performance should generally be characterized by a slow, subtle agogic

movement. It generally remains measured (as later in the piano cadenza). It is important to clearly convey the musical gestures while avoiding any frivolous rubato. The first part of the cadenza finishes at the end of the fourth line. Throughout this section one should not elongate the rests for more than the duration indicated. The phrase should remain *forte* with no *diminuendo* until the end of the fourth line. The pulse remains constant until the *ritenuto*. The quarter rest between the D# and the low C marks a sort of strangling of the voice, a dramatic cut in the speech. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the *diminuendo* of the bridge (the last eight notes of the fourth line), which leads to the next variation (beginning of the fifth line). Diminuendo to *pianissimo* in order to highlight the timbre used by the saxophone in the second section of the cadenza, which begins on the fifth line: *piano* (*subito* after the imperceptible ending of the preceding note).

The second part of the saxophone cadenza is virtuosic, and is a variation of the theme's first four notes, here somewhat modified. The rhythm is binary. The notes of the theme are reproduced systematically in the lower octave (D# to D#, C# to C#, D# to D#, F# to F#, D# to D#). Do not start playing this binary rhythm in 3/8. With the harmonic progression ascending, increase the speed and the dynamic simultaneously until a *forte* is achieved with the arpeggios approximately in 64th notes by the end of the seventh line and continuing through the eighth line. Progressively diminish the dynamic as indicated, until the last note, the low Bb in the middle of the tenth line, is held softly without weakening.

The third section of this cadenza contrasts with the *legato* of the second part. It starts *piano* as do the two previous parts. The notated staccato is neither dry nor light; it is a well-accented staccato at first but *piano*, and gets lighter and lighter as the speed and *crescendo* progress.

The second cadenza, assigned to the piano, is also in three-part form. A brassy and vigorous new theme is first introduced. A contrasting theme follows, which the composer once said should be labeled "*rêveur*" (dreamy). After the fanfare theme returns, the work's third large part follows.

The third section of the work (*Finale*), a duo for saxophone and piano, is very dynamic. It is comprised of several themes that are developed. The first theme, notated in 9/8, 6/8, 9/8, is in fact, as often found in Stravinsky, in 6/8 + 6/16, 4/8 + 6/16, 5/8 + 6/16, 9/8. I suggest reading the last three lines of page three in the saxophone part as 4/8 + 5/8 + 6/8, 6/8 + 7/8 + 8/8 instead of the notated 9/8, 6/8, 12/8, 9/8.

When I played this piece for the composer, Desenclos asked me to play the theme which he calls "*Rêveur*" (top of page four in the saxophone part) *meno mosso*. He also asked that there be a slight agogic *accelerando* into the piano response in the following measure, which itself is played at a slightly faster tempo. In the fifth line, as in the beginning of the Prelude's second part, precisely convey the sixteenth notes' binary character, without exaggerating the agogic movement, which would destroy the written *rubato* produced by the ternary/binary rhythmic superposition.

In the last line of page 4 in the saxophone part, the eighth notes in the theme are rhythmically vigorous and declamatory and must not be clipped short, especially not the syncopated Bb or the high Db. The pianist should do the same on pages 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10.

On page 5 of the saxophone part, in the second and third bars of the second line, the musical interest is found in the high notes. Do not harshly attack or accent the bass notes; on the contrary, play the high notes with a light accent.

Page 6: start "*un peu lent*," accelerate during one-and-a-half bars. Slightly *rallentando* at the end of the line, and continue a fifth higher where it says "*un peu lent au début, puis en accélérant*," but this time less slowly, and a little less *piano*. Then accelerate progressively over the course of the next six bars; an acceleration "*à la Vladimir Horowitz*"...as a well-oiled machine. The piece arrives at its climax where the solo part is

marked "*large et très déclamé*" in the fifth line. This is the culmination of the piece. One can prepare this gesture by slightly slowing down the preceding sixteenth notes.

A passage marked *rubato*, (note that this is the only *rubato* indicated by the composer) followed by a passage marked *meno mosso* (to be played at the same tempo as in page 4 in the saxophone part) leads back to the tempo of the *Finale*, marked by the Stravinsky-like rhythms. The work brilliantly ends in unison with the piano, in vigorous and accentuated musical flight.

The solo de concours *Prélude, Cadence et Finale* is different from other pieces in the same genre. Desenclos preferred Bach's musical language over the spectacular acrobatics of Paganini, Kreisler, Rachmaninov, and others. From the very beginning, the musical discourse adheres to an aesthetic of simplicity while avoiding typical formulas and frivolous models. Above all, Desenclos sought to have his music marked by profundity and depth.

I recorded this work on an LP in the United States on March 23, 1976. I would have liked to record this piece again in order to include more of the above observations.

Biography

Alfred Desenclos was born in Portel (Pas-de-Calais) on February 7, 1912, and died in Paris March 3, 1971.

After starting his studies at the Roubaix Conservatory, he was admitted to the Paris Conservatory. He won the first *Grand Prix de Rome* in 1942. Between 1943 and 1950, he was director of the Roubaix Conservatory. He subsequently became Professor of Harmony at the Paris Conservatory. He won the *Grand Prix musical de la Ville de Paris* in 1956.

Far from embracing any particular progressive compositional system, Alfred Desenclos was content to compose in a traditional tonal language, without any pretense or lofty ambition. Interestingly, he did not embrace serialism. He expressed himself largely in the musical language of his teachers. He was inspired primarily by the works of J. S. Bach, Fauré, and Franck.

Busy with pedagogical and administrative tasks, he wrote very few pieces. Each of his works is the result of profound reflection.

Alfred Desenclos was a romantic without overt passion, who possessed a charming sense of melancholy. He sought to avoid extremes of sentimentality and he preferred performers who represented his work in a sober and classical manner.

Selected Works by Desenclos

Orchestral music: *Concerto pour violon* (1953); *Incantation, thrène et danse* for trumpet and orchestra (1953); *Symphonie* (1956).

Vocal music: *L'Offrande lyrique* for voice and orchestra based on poems by R. Tagore (1951); *Messe de Requiem* for soloists, choir, and orchestra (1962).

Chamber music: *Quintette pour piano et cordes* (1945); *3 Pièces* for violin and piano (1946); *Prélude, cantilène et finale* for cello and piano (1947); *Bucoliques* for flute and piano (1964); *Fantaisie pour harpe* (1964); *Quatuor de saxophones* (1964);

and: pedagogical works.

Alfred Desenclos wrote two pieces for saxophone: *Prélude, Cadence et Finale* (1956) and *Quatuor de saxophones* (1964).