

The Saxophone Redefined



Henry Brant: Composing For The Saxophone

By Paul Cohen

Henry Brant's interview was
conducted by James Noyes

Since 1985 I have been privileged to write *Vintage Saxophones Revisited*, a column on the history of the saxophone as seen from a mostly instrumental perspective. I sought to introduce and clarify aspects of the saxophone that were either previously unknown or hazily understood. The colorful history of the saxophone made for enjoyable research and, I hope, informative and enjoyable reading.

The last twenty-five years has seen an acceptance and unprecedented use of the saxophone in all genres of music-making. Composers, performers and listeners are appreciating its flexible and varied musical attributes in all styles. Examples abound everywhere. In this season, two commissioned works premiered by the New York Philharmonic (Kernis and Torke) included four and six saxophones within the orchestra. The Philharmonic programmed no fewer than fifteen works using the saxophone. The new opera of John Harbison, commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera Company, includes a soprano saxophone. One of the most played orchestral works of the 1990s is the *Concerto for Saxophone Quartet and Orchestra* by Phillip Glass, commissioned and recorded by the Rascher Saxophone Quartet. It is an

exciting time to be a concert saxophonist! This wonderful revelation of the saxophone's capabilities has its roots in contemporary music making of past eras and generations, many of which remain largely unknown today.

As we approached the new century, a wealth of information, all-encompassing to the stature of the concert saxophone, began asserting its collective strength. This information (illuminating in every respect) ranges from the discovery of unknown works by major composers to uncovering traditions of concert playing extending back into the 19th century. It all reflects on the current popularity and use of the saxophone today. I began finding practical applications to newly discovered historical material in all my musical endeavors, from performing to publishing to teaching. Musicians outside of the saxophone world were impressed. Doors opened, engagements followed, a new sense of respect was felt. Clearly a new era for the saxophone was emerging. It was time to offer this new material to further enhance, perhaps enable, the understanding and acceptance of the saxophone. It was time to retire *Vintage Saxophones Revisited* and offer *The Saxophone Redefined!* This new column will continue to discuss the

saxophone's instrumental history and trends, but will also be concerned with the unknown history of its literature and composers, as well as the legacy of performers whose impact and contributions are not yet fully understood.

With this first installment of *The Saxophone Redefined*, I am very pleased to again offer the inspired research of my colleague, James Noyes. Our discussion of the remarkable composer, Henry Brant, prompted James to undertake the Brant Project, which included performances and a rare interview with Brant about his *Saxophone Concerto* and his other works for saxophone. The wealth of information about the *Concerto* is stunning, and important revelations about this work and its availability will surprise and entice many readers.

**Henry Brant:
Composing for the Saxophone
An interview with the composer
by James R. Noyes**

Henry Brant (b.1913) is one of the pioneer explorers and practitioners of 20th Century spatial music. A composer since the age of eight, Brant moved to New York in 1929, where he composed and conducted for radio, films, ballet, and jazz groups. He went on to teach

at Juilliard (1947-55), Columbia University (1947-55), and Bennington College (1957-80). Throughout his distinguished career Brant has received numerous honors and awards including two Guggenheim Fellowships, as well as grants from ASCAP/NISSIM, the Fromm Foundation, and the Koussevitzky Foundation. Brant was also the first American composer to win the prestigious Prix Italia.

In 1950, Brant had "come to feel that single-style music... could no longer evoke the new stresses, layered insanities, and multi-directional assaults of contemporary life on the spirit." He thus began to write music in which the planned positioning of the performers on stage and throughout the hall became an essential factor in the compositional scheme. This spatial procedure, which also limits and defines the contrasted music assigned to each performing group, has been inspired by the concepts and compositions of Charles Ives. While his early spatial compositions incorporated anywhere from two to fifty performers within a single concert hall, in more recent years Brant has explored ever expanding concert venues with greater performing forces. One such composition, *Fire in the Amstel* (1984), was scored for four boatloads of twenty-five flutes each, four jazz drummers, four church carillons, three brass bands, and four street organs (a three hour aquatic procession through the canals in the center of Amsterdam)!

In 1994 Henry Brant completed *A Concord Symphony*, his orchestration of Ives' *Concord Sonata*, a project begun in 1958. Brant's recent work, *Plowshares and Swords*, for orchestra, deployed throughout Carnegie Hall's boxes, balconies, and stage, received its premiere in February 1996. At the same concert, Brant conducted *A Concord Symphony* in its American premiere.

Saxophonists know Henry Brant primarily through his *Concerto for Alto Saxophone*, written for Sigurd Rascher in 1941, a time that pre-dates the composer's spatial works. This was the last of seven concertos composed for different instruments from 1931-41, Brant's self-described "Americana and satire period." According to the composer: "The first movement of the *Saxophone Concerto* is called *Prelude* and

indicates good weather. The second movement, *Idyll*, is more astronomical. Finally, there is a snide rondo called *Caprice*, complete with cadenza. It is aimed to exploit to the utmost the capacities of the solo instrument in virtuoso hands. Generally speaking, this seems to be a country concerto." (From Remington Records with liner notes by Jack Urbont)

The response to the work and Rascher's performance was overwhelmingly favorable and enthusiastic. Russell McLaughlin, music reviewer of the *Detroit News*, made the following comments regarding the world premier of the *Concerto*, given by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, on January 17, 1942, Victor Kolar conducting:

"It was a youthful crowd and there were probably present some representatives of the hep-cat contingent. These communicated a fervor to the whole audience in the matter of Brant's *Concerto* and Rascher's genial performance of it. It is in three movements, named *Prelude*, *Idyll* and *Caprice*, of which the last is, reasonably enough, the most impudent, being a little torrid also. Rascher can make the sax do everything, but recite the Gettysburg Address. He has a four octave range and he can play a pizzicato that must be heard to be believed. The composer glides from lyric melody to pure and simple low down antics. He believes, and proves his point, that the saxophone is capable of anything from the song of the lark to the hottest kind of squawk, and that this enormous scope is the legitimate concern of a soloist with a symphony orchestra. Whether anybody but Rascher could play it is something else."



HENRY BRANT'S WORKS FOR SAXOPHONE

Concerto for Alto Saxophone (1941, rev. 1970)

Strength Through Joy in Dresden: oboe, alto saxophone, piano

The Crossing: tenor voice, oboe/soprano saxophone, glockenspiel, violin, cello (1959)

Barricades: oboe/soprano saxophone, tenor voice, clarinet, bassoon, trombone, piano, xylophone, string quartet (1961)

Underworld: baritone (alto) saxophone, pipe organ (1963)

From Bach's Menagerie: SATB saxophone quartet (1963, rev. 1983)

RECORDING INFORMATION

Concerto for Alto Saxophone

Sigurd Rascher, Saxophone

Thor Johnson and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

The American Composers Series

Remington Records (1953)

HENRY BRANT'S HOME PAGE

<http://www-ccrma.stanford.edu/~daj/brant.html>

Another favorable review of the premier was written by J. D. Callaghan, Music Editor for the *Detroit Free Press*:

"The Brant composition was marked by the feeling for humor which is finding such authentic expression among the moderns. Rascher is one of the few who have been able to extend the range of the saxophone at least one and one-half octaves by the use of harmonics. The ease with which he skips through long intervals is something amazing, to say the least. His use

of pizzicati and the development of tone have well established the saxophone as a virtuoso instrument, at least in his own capable hands."

Other works on this Detroit Symphony program included the first orchestral performance of Percy Grainger's *Immovable Do*, as well as Debussy's *Rhapsodie for Orchestra and Saxophone*. Rascher also performed two encores: folk tunes, from his native Sweden.

In the early 1950s, Rascher recorded Brant's *Concerto for Alto Saxophone* with the Cincinnati Orchestra, Thor Johnson, conducting. In 1970, Brant revised the *Concerto*, rewriting the accompaniment and scoring the solo part for either trumpet or alto saxophone. Recently, there has been renewed interest in the original 1941 edition of the *Concerto*, and it is Mr. Brant's intention to make this version once again available.

What follows is an interview between James Noyes and Henry Brant discussing the *Concerto for Alto Saxophone*.

How did your Concerto for Alto Saxophone come to be written?

I heard a radio broadcast in November of 1939, of Rascher playing the Ibert *Concertino da Camera* with the New York Philharmonic, and I was surprised by the high notes. I was sure they weren't played on a soprano and I was very interested in learning more about this extended range. While trying to figure out how to get in touch with Rascher, I actually received a card from him, saying he had made contact with a mutual friend, who told him I was interested in the saxophone and interested in writing something for the instrument. I quickly made a saxophone version of my *Clarinet Concerto* and Rascher came over and we played it together. It worked quite well, except that I very cautiously didn't go beyond the conventional range of the saxophone, so Rascher showed me what he could do with the extra octave and a half.

It was then that we discussed the idea of a new work specifically for saxophone, embodying all Rascher's innovations, but he said he would have

to see the finished work before he could undertake to perform it and would not do so unless he approved of the music. On so equivocal a basis, I naturally felt no urgency to undertake the project and was thus much surprised to receive a postcard about a year later stating that he had scheduled my *Concerto* for performance with the Detroit Symphony and asking if I could give him any information about the work! At that point (summer of 1941), the piece got very quickly written. As was the custom at the time, the first version was for the solo saxophone with a two-line and three-line score, mostly playable on the piano, which I then orchestrated. The style of the *Concerto* resembles somewhat the commercial work I was doing during the 30's in film scores, radio backgrounds, jazz groups, and ballet.

I arranged a preliminary premiere with the National Youth Administration Orchestra (one of Roosevelt's WPA projects) conducted by Dean Dixon, a remarkably fine black conductor, who had made a great success in Europe, but never could secure anything more

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substantial than guest conductorships in the US. What I call the professional premiere with the Detroit Symphony conducted by Victor Kolar took place on January 17, 1942. Shortly after the premier, another performance of the *Concerto* took place in Queensland, Australia.

Tell me about your decision to score the Concerto for wind band.

Rascher was quite pleased with the *Concerto* and subsequently, he requested me to arrange the accompaniment for band so that more frequent performances could take place. I did this without making changes in the music except as necessitated by the idiom of wind and brass only, without strings, and performances of this version followed. The instrumentation of the wind band arrangement of the *Saxophone Concerto* was for clarinet choir, flutes, tuba and one percussionist playing two large bongos or two tom-toms of different size, xylophone, glockenspiel, woodblock, cowbell, snare drum. The inclusion of a mini-

mum of two alto clarinets and two bass clarinets was mandatory. I chose this instrumentation with the intention of providing an accompaniment background congenial to the saxophone without ever overpowering it. This condition was realized in the performances that took place, but I also discovered a want of contrast between the timbres of the solo saxophone and the band. For this reason, this arrangement has been withdrawn and is no longer available for performance; I don't intend to make it available with the original 1941 *Concerto*.

The wind band arrangement was written in 1950. It followed the text of the original orchestral version as closely as possible, unlike the published version (1973, published in 1996) for saxophone and nine instruments, which contains numerous substantial revisions of the music.

Explain your decision to revise the Saxophone Concerto in 1970.

After 1950, my idiom changed radically to a highly complex contrapuntal

style involving simultaneous collisions of different kinds of music and widely-distanced spatial arrangements of the performers. By 1970, I felt that I would like to bring this *Saxophone Concerto* a little more into the general point of view of my post 1950 music. Accordingly, I undertook a revision in which I also reduced the instrumentation of the accompaniment for nine instruments only so as to make it applicable to programs of chamber music proportions. It is this version which now exists in published form by Carl Fischer, Inc. Both the solo saxophone part and the accompaniment are substantially different from the original 1941 version with orchestra and its transcription for band. The solo part can be performed on trumpet or alto saxophone. The trumpet version has been recorded (played by Gerard Schwartz) who was then a trumpet player. He's now the conductor of the Seattle Symphony.



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Upon publication of the revised 'Concerto,' you withdrew the 1941 original from public performance. What was your reasoning behind this decision?

My reason for doing so had nothing to do with the discrepancy between the two versions of the music; I wished to put an end to the poor ensemble of the orchestral playing which I had heard in such performances as that of the NBC Orchestra conducted by Howard Hanson and the Cincinnati Orchestra as conducted by Thor Johnson. The latter is the recording which has made the piece known to two generations of saxophone players; the perfunctory orchestral playing is redeemed by the brilliance of Rascher's handling of the solo part. Dean Dixon was dealing with inexperienced players, but the lack of authoritative cohesion in his performance was painfully apparent. Again, it was Rascher's playing alone that made the work a success. This is all the more surprising to me since the three conductors mentioned above were all particularly admired for their expertise and sympathy with regard to new American music.

Is there any chance the original version of the 'Concerto' might be revived?

In recent years, I have received numerous communications from former students of Sigurd Rascher, all of whom prefer the 1941 form of the piece to the published revision and requesting permission to perform it. I have also noticed an encouraging development in greatly increased skill and aptitude on the part of the new generation of American conductors, in their ability to present American music in a convincing, authoritative way as well as a new generation of Rascher-trained virtuoso saxophonists. I have accordingly decided, in the near future, to make the 1941 version of the *Concerto* once again available.

You speak very highly of Sigurd Rascher and his playing. Were there other projects on which the two of you worked together?

Yes. Rascher played solo parts in the orchestra in several documentary films, which I orchestrated. He also performed on soprano and baritone saxophones in my original score for the feature film, *My Father's House*. Also, I was asked to compose two short pieces

of incidental music for one of the plays in Bertolt Brecht's *The Private Life of the Master Race* for saxophone, oboe, and piano. I asked my friends Rascher and Josef Marx to play with me for this single engagement. My interest in large groups of saxophones extended to some projects in which Rascher was not involved: my documentary score, *Dr. B*, used two sopranos, two altos, tenor, baritone and bass; and my orchestration of the Hollywood film, *Cleopatra* (music by Alex North), used two sopranos, two altos, two tenors, baritone, bass, and contrabass.

A nonet of saxophones including a contrabass. Where did you get that idea?

I wanted the complete set of saxophones, and I got them! Of course, I'd never heard such a combination, but I had an idea there would be something special in there. They searched up and down the West Coast for a contrabass and a contrabass player. They found one; he was an attorney in San Diego, who played the instrument in Dixieland gigs on Saturday evenings. So, in order to get him, they paid him for a week's work in court, and so he came and played in the *Cleopatra* orchestra with this monster instrument! It was a very old, beat up model, sort of rusty, but it worked and it was a remarkable addition to the orchestra.

Would any of this music be appropriate as a concert piece for a saxophone choir?

None of the orchestration is complete with just the saxophone choir alone. However, the saxophone section in the *Cleopatra* orchestra did include the four members of the Hollywood Quartet, for whom I wrote *From Bach's Menagerie*, a saxophone quartet in six movements (1963, revised in 1983). After this film assignment, I returned to Bennington College before plans could be made to perform the quartet. The New York Saxophone Quartet eventually premiered the work in 1975 as part of the "Our Bach" concert series at Alice Tully Hall.

On a recent recital, I performed your spatial composition, 'Underworld' (1963), for baritone saxophone and pipe organ. Discuss this and other chamber works that utilize saxophone.

Underworld is an extensive rework-

ing of material, extracted from my quartet, *From Bach's Menagerie*. The 5th movement, *Bach's Whales*, is the direct source for *Underworld*. The work was premiered at Bennington College by Bruce Weinberger and me.

I remember on one occasion, Rascher came up from Shushan, New York, which is not very far from Bennington, with about a dozen of his students and quite a lot of hardware. Bruce Weinberger played the bass saxophone, and I have never heard it played in that way before or since. If everybody could play the bass saxophone the way he did then, composers would have a very different opinion of the instrument. I've used the soprano saxophone a number of times like in *The Crossing* (1959) and *Barricades* (1961), and my colleague at Bennington College, Gunner Schonbeck, played the soprano saxophone very well.

What are your thoughts on how the saxophone should be used as a solo instrument?

I have some comments on slap-tonguing. Saxophone players who haven't heard Rascher's recording of my *Concerto* don't have any idea of what Rascher could do with slap-tonguing. It's as though he added a xylophone to the instrument. It's in every way equivalent to xylophone or marimba. The attitude of many players is one of ignorant condescension and is as inappropriate on musical grounds as if violinists or cellists say, well, we don't ever play pizzicato. I think teachers have to learn Rascher's slap-tonguing and not the silly little clacks that a few players think is slap tonguing, but the careful study that he went through to develop that technique. Now, you ask, "What am I going to play"? The dearth of material is due to the ignorance and lack of enterprise of composers. I have a suggestion: make an arrangement for five saxophones (soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, and bass) of the pizzicato movement of Tchaikowski's *4th Symphony*. Also, one could arrange the pizzicato parts of the scherzo in the Debussy *String Quartet*; all of it in slap tonguing, of course. Then you could say, here are two first class pieces that use slap-tongue. It has to be done right. I've heard people attempt the passages in my concerto

with little clacks which are nothing.

What are your feelings toward saxophone ensembles?

I've written for SATB saxophone quartet and I've heard concerts of the Rascher Quartet and a variety of new pieces. But, my impression now is that the combination is a failure. First of all, as most people play the saxophone, the conventional two and a half octave range is hopelessly limited, you can't do much of anything with that. Then, there isn't sufficient difference in timbre between the instruments for contrapuntal music: the parts aren't sufficiently well identified. For harmonic music, the problem is that the low notes are louder than the other ones. I recently heard from my friend, David Pituch, that in Portugal, the saxophone quartets travel with a lot of hardware. They don't expect to do everything with SATB, and this way they get around the problems I've just described. This is the future of the quartet of saxophones, a truckload of equipment so there can be four E-flat sopraninos, three baritones and a bass, in addition to the traditional SATB. The idea of a quartet now seems arbitrary to me anyway because very few people write in terms of four parts any more. Of course I'm talking here about classical or legitimate playing (repulsive words!) In jazz playing, the standard quintet of two altos, two tenors, and a baritone, although never going above high written F, is a fine ensemble medium for harmonic textures.

As an orchestrator, what are your thoughts about the effective use of saxophones?

The combination of a unison of strings (not less than four) to which you add

one French horn, is a way of thickening the whole combination, all of a sudden, it sounds as though you have many more cellos. You can do the same thing with one saxophone, but you can do it better, because you can use any range. The horn is only useful in the alto range for that purpose, but for the tenor or bass ranges, the appropriate saxophone can be used. The increase in the string sonority is striking. This has been available to composers ever since the saxophone was invented and nobody's used it. I've heard Strauss' *Domestic Symphony* played with and without saxophones. He's included them in such a way that you can hardly tell when they are left out, that's not a serious use of them.

Do you have any further plans to write concert music for saxophones?

I'd like to write something for two septets, all of the sizes. As I now write spatial music, one would be at the front of the hall and the other at the back of the hall. Each would have a different conductor, and each would perform different material, including some jazz. But, the opportunities for doing that are formidable. First of all,

even to get a hold of one contrabass saxophone is a major operation. It's not impossible; if enough players wanted that, they'd get a hold of them. To me, it's as ridiculous not to include a contrabass saxophone in a saxophone orchestra as it would be to write a piece for string orchestra without string basses.

Any final thoughts?

That's my story about the saxophone so far. If a new generation of players becomes expert in slap tonguing and they want to collect contrabasses, I will write for saxophone orchestra. I'm ready to do it! §

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