

ПАВЛО БАРАБАЩУК

FEATURES OF THE ENSEMBLE PERFORMANCE
OF THE CONCERTO FOR SAXOPHONE *SHAMS* BY JEAN-DENIS MICHAT:
THE CASE OF THOMAS KURTZ'S PERFORMANCE
WITH AN ORCHESTRA OF SAXOPHONES

АНСАМБЛЕВА СПЕЦИФІКА ВИКОНАННЯ
КОНЦЕРТУ ДЛЯ САКСОФОНА «SHAMS» ЖАНА-ДЕНІ МІША
(НА ПРИКЛАДІ ВИКОНАВСЬКОЇ ІНТЕРПРЕТАЦІЇ ТОМАСА КУРЦА
З ОРКЕСТРОМ САКСОФОНІВ)

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Abstract. The article examines the characteristic features of the ensemble performance of Jean-Denis Michat's Saxophone Concerto *Shams* by the American saxophonist Thomas Kurtz with an orchestra of saxophones. The article emphasizes the interpretative features of the performance and indicates that the special nature of the ensemble interpretation lies in the composition of the orchestra: 11 saxophones (from bass saxophone to soprano) instead of 11 string and wind instruments, which leads to a special artistic reading and performance of the work. The article argues that combining a solo saxophone part with the accompaniment of an ensemble of saxophones is carried out due to the related timbral sound and specific saxophone touches, which creates a new sound of the Concerto and emphasizes its unique flavor.

The search and reproduction of modern means of musical expressiveness and imitation of the manner of virtuoso playing characterizes the modern stage performance practice of a saxophonist. From the perspective of forming a modern instrumental performance style, this concert significantly contributes to enriching and embodying instrumental music's artistic and symbolic world, strengthening its dramatic nature and enhancing the thematic content. The features of the style of ensemble concert performance of the 21st century are exciting reading for a modern saxophonist. These are, first of all, technical complexity, emotional expressiveness, and concert brightness.

Keywords: saxophone, concerto, ensemble saxophone performance, interpretation, instrumental performance style.

Introduction. The concerto *Shams* was written by the French composer Jean-Denis Michat in 2010 and premiered by the composer himself in 2012. During the period 2010–2022, this work became a must-see in the programs of many prestigious competitions and festivals, including the final round of the International Adolphe Sax Competition (Belgium 2014), the CNSMDP Master's Program (Paris 2015), the final round of the Andorra Saxfest International Competition (Andorra 2016), the final round of the International Classic Winds Competition (Germany 2018), the final round of the Saxgo International Saxophone Congress (Slovenia 2018), and the opening concert of

the Asia Pacific Academy (Thailand 2019). This list indicates that professional musicians highly appreciate this work and believe that it can reveal the performer's creative and technical potential.

There are two versions of the concerto: the first is a performance of the concerto by the composer himself with the original orchestra; the second version is a performance of the concerto by the American saxophonist Thomas Kurtz with an orchestra of saxophones (transcription by Jean-Denis Michat). This interpretation's peculiarity lies in the orchestra's composition — 11 saxophones (from bass saxophone to soprano) instead of 11 string and wind instruments, and in the saxophonist's performance and artistic vision. Combining a solo part with orchestral accompaniment due to the timbre of the sound and specific saxophone touches creates a unique flavor and a new sound.

Thus, addressing the problem of performing an interpretation of Jean-Denis Michat's concerto *Shams* (ensemble version) is motivated by the interest in reproducing the artistic style of French composer's thought in the musical culture of the XXI century, full of remarkable contrasts and bright artistic means of expression. The originality of the composer's creative thinking and his use of many modern performance techniques for the saxophone in writing the concerto resulted in the appearance of a virtuoso work for saxophone, which exquisitely combines the modern French school of composition with oriental flavor, felt starting from the first notes of the work.

Literature Review. The French school of composing, the figure of Jean-Denis Michat, and the *Shams* Concerto have been studied by Eric Wallrup (2018) and Tom Smialek (2013). The American school of saxophone is analyzed in the works of Jacob Adam Kappey (2003) and Joseph M. Murphy (1996). The problem of developing a national brass school is highlighted in the works of Volodymyr Apatskyi and Roman Vovk (2014). The problem of ensemble instrumentalism is presented in the study by Liudmyla Povzun (2013). The problem of interpretation is highlighted in the work of Viktor Moskalenko (2002).

The aim of the paper is to explore the special features of the ensemble version of Jean-Denis Michat's Concerto *Shams* performed by the American saxophonist Thomas Kurtz and a saxophone orchestra.

Results and Discussion. Jean-Denis Michat (1971) is a saxophonist, composer, and professor at the Lyon Conservatory, one of the best contemporary representatives of the French saxophone school, who actively develops the saxophone as an *instrument of classical culture*. He studied at the National Conservatory of Higher Music in Paris in specialized classes of saxophone, analysis, music history, composition, and new technologies. Jean-Denis Michat's professional saxophone class at the Lyon Conservatory attracts students worldwide today. Jean-Denis Michat has written several compositions and transcriptions for saxophone; in particular, his latest solo album, *Dark Side*, is dedicated to his music, where improvisation and traditions of French and world music are mixed (Jean-Denis Michat, n.d.).

The three-movement concerto *Shams* for saxophone and 11 instruments was composed by Jean-Denis Michat in 2010. Translated from Arabic, *Shams* means "sun," and this title is a fundamental component of the musical idea of the work. Thus, in the first part, the music is more mobile and dynamic, with constant development, reminiscent of bright sunshine; in the second part of the concerto, the development of the solo saxophone part and the orchestral accompaniment resembles the sunrise, the music seems to be filled with light and power, this effect is created by the conducting of one theme from *p* for the soloist and *pizzicato* accompaniment in the orchestra to *fff* and *tutti* of the entire orchestra; in the third part, the music is more calm and meaningful, reminiscent of the evening before sunset. As a result, thanks to the versatility of the soloist and orchestra's palette, the magic of sunlight is felt throughout the day, from sunrise to sunset. Given the oriental flavor and melody of this concerto, the image of the "sun" in this work is generalized and syncretic.

The first page of the score and the keyboard of the concerto contains author's note with a dedication to the famous French composer of the twentieth century, Jacques Ibert (1890–1962), and philosophical reflections by Jean-Denis Michat: "His music brilliantly illustrates the qualities of French music, namely clarity, and elegance... Delving into Jacques Ibert's story means learning how he was suspended from his duties by the Vichy government and remembering the fate of French composers during the occupation. We artists are very aware of this common breath that we call heritage. We also know that this heritage is changing and growing richer every day and in the hearts of those who have undertaken to 'build' it. More than anyone else, we measure the complexity of this important existential quest; we also know intimately how much integration, discovery, assimilation, and love of foreign cultures have and have already magnified this heritage" (Smialek, 2013, p. 213). In this author's note, one can feel the artist's affiliation with the French school of composition, his role and contribution, and the importance of its development. Disclosing the concert's content and performing professionally also require deep creative reflection.

Having studied the works of Jacques Ibert, one of his most famous works is the chamber concerto for saxophone and 11 instruments (1935). Comparing these two works, we can see a lot of similarities between them, from the orchestra's composition to the musical drama. In both works, the composers used 11 instruments in the orchestra parts: first and second violins, viola, cello, double bass, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, French horn, and trumpet; both concertos are three-movement pieces with similar dynamics (fast first and third movements, slow second).

The reference to Jacques Ibert in the author's note, we can conclude that the appeal to this genre and concept is not an accident but, to some extent, a revival of the genre of the three-movement concerto in a modern way and is a manifestation of respect for the cultural heritage of France.

The concerto's first movement is written in sonata form with some exceptions, which is a modern vision of the form of a classical concerto. There is the first subject group (in the reprise in the dominant key), transition before the second subject group, which differs in the exposition and reprise. The second subject group and the closing zone are almost identical, with a small development.

At the beginning of the first movement, the composer indicated the tempo (quarter note 108) and the character — Mordant. This term accurately and precisely interprets the idea and concept of the first movement because the composer emphasizes the importance of clear articulation and rhythm in this part.

The central theme contains a very energetic and clear rhythmic pattern, using various types of articulations and accents, many quarter tones, alternative fingering (+ sign), and a special saxophone touch called slap tone (imitation of a click with pitch preservation). This stroke is found quite often in all three parts of the concert; except for this variety, you will find a slap tone without preserving pitch, which sounds like a drumbeat. These specific saxophone techniques will be present throughout the work but vary depending on the nature of the second and third movements.

The composer skillfully develops the first subject group around the notes E, F, and sometimes G# (G, Ab, and H); the part is written in the mode of Eb. The melody develops on the notes of the harmonic a-moll; almost the entire theme is based on the dominant and sometimes subdominant harmony, which creates a certain tension, and the interval of the extended second F-G# creates an oriental flavor. It is this second movement that will be used throughout the work. The orchestra part supports the central part with accented chords. The main idea of the work, and especially of this movement, is constant movement, creating a sense of harmonic and rhythmic tension. The composer masterfully manages the texture, filling or weakening it when necessary. During the first movement, the composer skillfully modifies the rhythmic component, complicating it

with many polyrhythms in the accompaniment part, which, when superimposed on the solo part, create precisely the effect that can be compared to swing or percussion.

The second movement is written in a simple three-part form, where we can conditionally distinguish three runs of the theme A, A1, A2, and the soloist's cadenza. Theme A is a 36-bar theme that grows in dynamics and texture with each passage. It begins in the first bar in the small and first octave, with the soloist playing pianissimo and the orchestra's string group playing pizzicato. It ends in the third bar on *fff* in the third and fourth octaves with the solo saxophone and the orchestra's tutti. The central theme hardly transforms, only growing in tessitura and dynamics. At the same time, all the characteristic touches and intonations of the soloist from the first movement remain in this part. This part dynamically resembles a sunrise or can be compared to a caravan marching through the desert.

The third movement is atypical for a classical three-movement concerto, where the last final movement is usually lively and active. The composer chose the idea of a moderate finale (the quarter note is 60). Still, due to the acceleration at the end of the movement and the soloist's very energetic recitative, one can feel the grandeur and enchantment of the finale. Composed in a relatively free form, it resembles a fantasy using the melody and rhythm of the first and second movements. There are recitatives in this movement, new themes often appear, and these particular dramatic elements emphasize the uniqueness and unusual nature of the finale of the three-movement concert cycle.

The compositional and dramaturgical idea of the concerto (Moskalenko, 2002, p. 10) is to embody the principle of thorough thematic development in the artist's modern vision of the form of a classical three-movement concerto, using modern compositional techniques and performance techniques, oriental melody and a virtuoso solo part to achieve a high semantic concentration of sound. The peculiarities of the *Shams* concerto style indicate that the composer strives for a cross-cutting development in each movement. Each movement is a special "event" within the entire cycle. At the same time, the composer uses the themes of the first movement, its intonations, and motifs throughout the concerto, changing mainly the tempo and dynamics.

The semantic idea of the work is represented by the virtuoso plasticity of the music, manifested in the development of musical thought in contrasting emotional and dramatic manifestations — constant movement and calm, enthusiasm, dance and stasis, etc.

In this concert, the performer has the opportunity for different interpretations. The main goal of the performer, regardless of the interpretation, is to preserve the work's semantic idea and maintain a constant precise rhythm, articulation, and sense of movement.

The author of this article had the unique opportunity to take a master class with Jean-Denis Michat in 2019, where the artistic and performance challenges of the *Shams* concerto were discussed. While working on the first movement, Jean-Denis Michat emphasized the importance of maintaining a precise rhythm and articulation at the beginning of the first movement and the entire concert. Due to its complex rhythmic pattern and diverse and specific strokes, Jean-Denis Michat emphasized that the saxophone part is a particular state that can be compared to jazz swing or percussion. The immersion in this state throughout all three movements creates a specific concert mood and is the composer's intention.

In this article, to highlight the specific features of the ensemble interpretation of the concerto, we will turn to its performance (*Shams Concerto*, 2020) by the American saxophonist Thomas Kurtz with the Texas Saxophone Orchestra (transcription by Jean-Denis Michat).

Thomas Kurtz is a renowned American saxophonist, educator, and researcher. As a performing artist, Thomas Kurtz has won awards at various competitions, including the Delta Symphony Orchestra Concerto Competition, *Golden Classical Music* International Competition and the MTNA Young Artist Competition. His teachers include Stephen Page, Geoffrey Deibel, Zachary

Shemon, and Stacy Wilson. He is currently pursuing his DMA in Saxophone Performance at the University of Texas at Austin while also serving as Adjunct Saxophone Professor at The University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

Describing the performance of the concerto *Shams* by Thomas Kurtz with the saxophone orchestra, it is necessary to explore the special features of the ensemble performance as such.

Chamber and ensemble music, which was developed before the Baroque period, was influenced by the ideas of the era: “geringe Invention” (“modest capacity for invention”), which has an etymological synonym for “play.” The word “game” is multifaceted and etymologically related to music (Povzun, 2013, p. 56). Then the concept went far beyond the narrow semantics and absorbed a plurality of meanings (a rich spectrum of which covers a variety of areas of life), but the musical basis of the concept has not disappeared: “play” is the action of a musician.

An ensemble is a creative interaction of performers in quantitatively and timbre conditionally limited instrumental compositions, taking into account many performance components (technological, psychological, artistic, and interpretive) in a coordinated joint sounding in the unity and inseparability of the means of creative and figurative expression, which forms a “performance continuum common to all members of the ensemble” (Povzun, 2013, p. 55), formed by the identity of awareness of the semantic and stylistic tasks of the work.

Ensemble performance is a correlation between the processes of free playing, stage performance as professional playing, and performance as the highest form of mastery in playing, which, from the standpoint of the historical development of musical art in general and chamber ensemble performance in particular, is defined by numerous artistic, aesthetic and cultural factors. Performance as a professional ensemble skill goes beyond the narrow framework of playing music, making it possible to embody the spirit of ensemble harmony (artistic and dynamic, tempo and rhythmic, timbre and articulation) among the participants of a musical gathering based on collectively agreed artistic, aesthetic and semantic parameters. The criterion for the degree of ensemble coherence is a meaningful understanding of the role of each musician at each specific moment of joint music-making.

Playing in an ensemble is a significant problem for a saxophonist’s performance skills. In an ensemble, as in a creative team similar to a mini-orchestra, the instruments are vividly combined, each of which is a self-sufficient artistic unit. At the same time, there are characteristic differences between the instruments in dynamics, attack, articulation, timbre, register capabilities, etc. Ensemble musical integrity is achieved by high-quality sound content of the artistic and musical image when each ensemble member is a full-fledged actor.

In contemporary music, chamber music is an instrumental theater of personalized instrumental voices. Each instrument in the ensemble is a carrier of a certain image-role, the artistic properties of which are manifested through timbre (Apatskyi & Vovk, 2014, p. 225).

The synthesis of understanding the ensemble function of the saxophone and the new possibilities provided by its timbre and intonation in the ensemble have become a wide field for compositional discoveries in ensemble performance. Thus, the aesthetics of the ensemble performance of Jean-Denis Michat’s *Shams* concerto involves an emotional reproduction of the artistic image of the work based on the developed creative imagination of the participants of the ensemble game, their analytical and logical thinking and technical mobility of the playing apparatus.

Each of the saxophone orchestra instruments of the *Shams* Concerto reproduces its sound properties in relief. The richness of the voices reproduces a unique ensemble flavor of the concert. The saxophone ensemble has a so-called “area of expressive playing” where the instrument performs gradual and sudden nuanced shades (*forte*, *piano*, *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, *sforzando*, etc.) most accurately and best. This allows the saxophonist to play the material most accurately and ex-

pressively. The merging and “playful” combination of the timbres-characters of the saxophone ensemble in the concert *Shams* organically reproduces the composer’s intention.

In Thomas Kurtz’s interpretation, it is noticeable that the performer has chosen a slightly faster tempo, but this is justified because the concert’s music allows for such changes. This creates even more tension because, at this tempo, the already complex rhythmic structure becomes even more expressive. The accompaniment of the saxophone orchestra sounds brighter in timbre than the original composition, and the slapton stroke on the saxophone conveys some string touches that the soloist has. Using this stroke in the accompaniment creates a special effect from the first notes because it resembles percussion, which is not in the original chamber music. The original version with the chamber orchestra is calmer in tone and character, with the strings smoothing out accents and dissonances, creating a softer sound cushion for the soloist. Instead, the version with the saxophone orchestra is more expressive regarding sound presentation and sound. All the accents and dissonances sound louder and more expressive due to the instruments’ peculiarities and merge more with the soloist, creating one big sound wave. This is especially noticeable in the concerto’s second movement, where in the original version, the strings play with a pizzicato stroke and strike the body of the stringed instruments. In the version with the saxophone orchestra, this stroke is replaced by a slapton: closed (with pitch preservation) and open (a bright click without pitch preservation). With these effects, the second movement of the concerto in the version with the saxophone orchestra acquires new colors with the solo saxophone part with oriental motifs, which is especially emphasized in the culmination of the movement, where the saxophone orchestra actively supports the soloist in the high altissimo register.

Thomas Kurtz achieves constant development and movement through dynamic and rhythmic shifts, which is extremely important in this concerto, emphasizing the climaxes and the emergence of new thematic leads. Thus, due to the stretto, the performer emphasizes the quarter-tone development in the connecting part of the first movement (bars 43–47, 58–63). The saxophonist consistently demonstrates clear articulation and filigree technique. The soloist’s cadenza in the second movement sounds accessible and thoughtful due to expressive articulation and phrasing. The third movement performed by Thomas Kurtz sounds in a declamatory key calmly, sensibly, and freely, which allows one to fully feel the texture of the musical fabric and its semantic shades.

The notion of *texture* implies a specific differentiation in explaining the playing dispositions of the ensemble players. This is manifested in the inter-instrumental dynamics of the saxophone parts (sound-dynamic balancing within the aesthetic limits of the theme-support, primary-secondary), in the correction of the dynamic sound by the acoustic-auditory conditions of performance. The artistic differentiation of the concert texture is because the musical fabric is a multi-coordinate structure of instrumental and textural combinations — an ensemble texture that can stratify and separate different textural layers (melody — background, thematic conceptions — thematic contrasts) and combine different tempo-rhythmic, timbre-register, dynamic, articulation and intonation components of ensemble expression (Povzun, 2013, p. 61).

Enriching the sound of the concerto’s texture, Thomas Kurtz performs the finale more calmly and freely than it sounds in the original version, making many slowdowns and pauses. Still, due to the loud dynamics (*fff*) and bright sound, timbre colors, the final part gets its own sound and semantic content. At this time, the orchestra sounds the ostinato note B, which grows in dynamics and is picked up by other orchestral groups. Given this, we can conclude that Thomas Kurtz eloquently interprets the finale as calm but large-scale in sound.

It is also necessary to emphasize such an essential characteristic of the performance of a concerto with a saxophone orchestra as *timbre*, which should be understood in the context of revealing the maximum instrumental capabilities of the saxophone: sound-expressive, interpretive, in the context of expanding the content of musical meanings and images of the concert. The per-

formance of Jean-Denis Michat's concerto *Shams* by saxophonist Thomas Kurtz with the saxophone orchestra can be characterized from the standpoint of the phenomenon of *timbral personification*, which is inherent in the ensemble specificity of the concert in the context of emphasizing the single-tone specificity of instrumental sound production, and if the main task of the ensemble is to "smooth out" the differences in sound, then, creating a polyplanar polyphonic ensemble texture of the interpretive version of the saxophone concerto, Thomas Kurtz achieves the desired ensemble effect by emphasizing the sound of the saxophone as the main active character of the musical action, the leading actor by presenting the personalized sound "close-up," contrastingly, emotionally, and primarily due to the articulation and timbre features of its performance sound presentation.

The combination of saxophones has a unique, colorful flavor in the ensemble texture of the concerto, which ceases to be a combination of horizontal (melodic) and vertical (harmonic) layers but is reproduced in sound and semantic combinations diagonally (in the interaction of vertical and horizontal components, dynamic instrumental upsurges arise at the intersection at all levels of instrumental-articulatory saxophone ensemble interaction). The timbral personification in the version of the concerto *Shams* with the saxophone orchestra consists of the quality of dynamic, articulatory, timbral, and acoustic indicators of musical sound, which made it possible to outline the artistic and expressive criteria of the ensemble performance of the concerto.

Conclusions. Jean-Denis Michat's *Shams* Concerto for saxophone and 11 instruments (2010) was written in the mature period of the contemporary French composer's life, and this virtuoso work has become a permanent feature at many competitions, exams, etc. The performance of this concerto can show the performer's level, technical arsenal, and artistic vision. The concerto is characterized by high technical requirements due to its complexity and by various strokes, articulation techniques, modern performance techniques, etc.

The interpretive version of Jean-Denis Michat's Concerto *Shams* by saxophonist Thomas Kurtz and a saxophone orchestra is interesting because it contains dynamic, rhythmic, textural, and timbre transformations of the original version of the concerto. From the point of view of the development of a modern instrumental performance style, this interpretive version of the concerto with a saxophone orchestra is a significant contribution to the enrichment and embodiment of the artistic and symbolic world of saxophone music, strengthening its dramatic beginning, enriching its thematic content.

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**АНСАМБЛЕВА СПЕЦИФІКА ВИКОНАННЯ
КОНЦЕРТУ ДЛЯ САКСОФОНА «SHAMS» ЖАНА-ДЕНІ МІША
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З ОРКЕСТРОМ САКСОФОНІВ)**

Анотація. У статті розглянуто особливості інтерпретації Концерту для саксофона Жана-Дені Міша «Shams», яку здійснив американський саксофоніст Томас Курц у супроводі оркестру саксофонів. Вказано, що специфіка ансамблевої інтерпретації полягає в складі оркестру – 11 саксофонів, від бас-саксофону до сопрано, замість 11 струнних та духових інструментів. Це обумовлює своєрідне художньо-виконавське прочитання твору. У статті обстоюється думка, що поєднання сольної партії саксофона та ансамблю саксофонів здійснюється за рахунок спорідненого тембрального звучання та специфічних саксофонових штрихів, що створює нове звучання Концерту, підкреслює його особливий колорит.

Для сучасної сценічної виконавської практики саксофоніста характерним є пошук й відтворення відповідних сучасній добі засобів музичної виразності, наслідування манери віртуозної гри. З точки зору формування сучасного інструментального виконавського стилю, даний Концерт є значним внеском у збагачення і конкретизацію художньо-образного світу інструментальної музики, посилення її драматичного начала, збагачення тематичного наповнення. Стилїстика ансамблевого концертного виконавства ХХІ століття становить інтерес для сучасного саксофоніста-виконавця з точки зору, передусім, технічності, емоційної виразності, концертної яскравості.

Ключові слова: саксофон, концерт, ансамблеве саксофонове виконавство, інтерпретація, виконавський стиль.

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