

What Brubeck Got From Milhaud

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Article:

For millions of people, Dave Brubeck is the most famous jazz musician. Aside from Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and a handful of others, no other jazz artist has ever achieved Brubeck's success. His picture appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1954. His celebrated quartet recorded "Take Five" and "Blue Rondo a la Turk" —the first jazz singles ever to sell over a million copies. He has performed for every U.S. president since John E Kennedy and, in 1988, played in Moscow for the summit meeting between Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev. He holds honorary degrees from six universities, has his own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and has won numerous Down Beat Critics' awards. It would be difficult to name a more recognized and decorated jazz musician. Yet Dave Brubeck nearly didn't make it.

Dyslexia And Resentment

He was born with "one eye so crossed," explains Brubeck, "all you could see was white." He wore special infant glasses, even in the crib, until the condition was eventually corrected. Brubeck speculates that this had something to do with the musical dyslexia he has suffered all his life. To this day, he has difficulty reading music, figuring out unusual rhythms (at least on paper) and spelling. Brubeck does not use the term dyslexia. He refers to it simply as "my problem." Brubeck continues, "Nobody has ever been able to explain it to me, and I can't explain it either."

As an undergraduate music student at the College of the Pacific between 1938 and 1942, his inability to read music nearly cost him his graduation. About six months before he was to graduate, Brubeck was summoned to the office of the dean of the Conservatory of Music and a plea bargain was struck. Brubeck would be allowed to graduate, said the dean, provided that he never teach. The seeds of resentment were planted.

Brubeck's maverick spirit was further cultivated by early encounters with Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles. Schoenberg insisted that every note be justified by a system, that there were right notes and wrong notes. "Why should you be the one to decide which notes are the right ones?" queried the twenty-year-old upstart Brubeck. Schoenberg pulled Brubeck into his study, pointed to the nine symphonies of Beethoven on the shelf, and asserted, "I know every note of those symphonies, and I know why every note is where it is. That is what gives me the authority to tell you which of your notes are right."

In pursuing jazz, Brubeck rebelled against orthodox musical authority, partly because he was repulsed by the arrogant narrow-mindedness of the classical musical establishment and partly because his dyslexia prevented him from participating in that establishment. Brubeck might say he simply was more drawn to jazz than classical music. Yet his ability to play by ear and his improvisational skill probably developed to such a high degree precisely because he could not read music.

Brubeck also suffered from the stigma of beginning his graduate study at Mills College under the GI Bill. "Everyone thought GIs were dumb," says Brubeck. Fortunately for Brubeck, however, Darius Milhaud was not everyone.



Dave Brubeck takes his teacher, Darius Milhaud, to a concert of Milhaud's music at San Francisco State University in 1949.

An Influential Teacher

While Brubeck did have other musical influences — Bach; Brubeck's mother and first piano teacher, Elizabeth Ivey Brubeck; his two older brothers; and Duke Ellington and Fats Waller — it is arguable that none was a greater teacher to Brubeck than Milhaud. Brubeck writes, "Three Jewish teachers have been a great influence in my life: Irving Goleman, Darius Milhaud and Jesus." Further confirmation of Milhaud's importance to Brubeck lies in the name of Brubeck's firstborn son, Darius, born in 1947.

After an army stint in Europe from 1942 to 1946, Brubeck began composition study with Milhaud at Mills College. The way had been paved perhaps by Brubeck's older brother Howard, who had begun studying with Milhaud in 1940 and occasionally thereafter served as Milhaud's assistant.

Milhaud was the perfect teacher for Brubeck. He was, in fact, something of a musical messiah for him. Howard Brubeck puts it bluntly: "Milhaud saved Dave." Milhaud, who had himself been so strongly influenced by jazz and had shunned the overwrought pomp of post-Wagnerian romanticism, appreciated Brubeck's swinging, homespun improvisations in a way that neither the dean at the College of the Pacific nor Schoenberg ever could. Milhaud, in fact, encouraged Brubeck to pursue jazz and composition. Growing up dyslexic in an atmosphere of

literate and trained musicians and in an age when jazz was largely seen as an undignified field of artistic endeavor, Brubeck was lucky to have found Milhaud.

Composition lessons with Milhaud must have been lessons in frustration for Brubeck even as they were opportunities for Milhaud to show benevolent patience. Brubeck writes, "Milhaud's usual response, after hearing me play through a new piece was 'Very good, Boo-Boo, but not what you have written.'"⁴ One imagines that Dave's older brother Howard helped transcribe many an exercise.

Milhaud followed two approaches in his tutelage. On the one hand, he used the strictest Paris Conservatoire method when it came to counterpoint: no rules could be broken. When it came to harmony or matters of composition, however, there were no rules. According to another Milhaud student, Bill Smith, Milhaud's favorite sayings were "Dare!" and "Why not?" These words surely bolstered Brubeck's self-confidence and served as an antidote to Schoenberg's "right note, wrong note" method of teaching composition. Milhaud was completely undogmatic and unfettered when it came time to dream up new compositions and invent new harmonies.

It is probable that Brubeck's love of rich chords and free-sounding harmonies came from Milhaud, especially from Milhaud's polytonal penchant for putting one chord in one hand and a different chord in the other. Many times, in fact, it is hard to distinguish Milhaud's harmonies from Brubeck's. (See Example 1 on p. 28.)

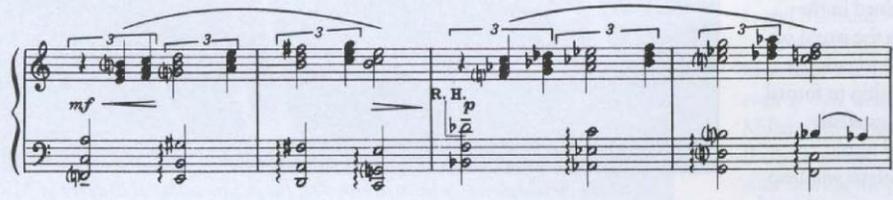
Example 1

Milhaud's *L'Enlèvement d'Europe*



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Brubeck's *The Duke*



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Milhaud's influence is also evident in Brubeck's proclivity toward large-scale choral works. Since the disbanding of Brubeck's original quartet in 1967, he has composed over a dozen works that combine vocal soloists, chorus and symphony orchestra, including a mass (*To Hope! A Celebration*), cantatas (*The Gates Of Justice*, *Truth Is Fallen*) and oratorios (*The Light In The Wilderness*, *Beloved Son*). Although Milhaud was prolific in several genres, his many operas constitute a significant portion of his total output. Brubeck cites Milhaud's impressive opera, *Christophe Colomb*, as one of the works he remembers hearing during his student days with Milhaud.⁶

Intriguing Irony

Milhaud, exhaustively trained in the classics, found inspiration in the world of jazz, while Brubeck, first and foremost a jazz musician whose relationship to formal training was spotty at best, ceaselessly explores the styles of classical music.

A further bit of psychoanalysis will help to illuminate their respective compositional styles and show why Milhaud was so important to Brubeck. Brubeck, shunned and ridiculed in his early life for his learning disability, composes oratorios and cantatas as weapons against those first teachers who told him he would never amount to anything in music, and as admission tickets to the theater of great composers, all of whom wrote large-scale, contrapuntally sophisticated works. Milhaud loved the swinging, brash music of Harlem and, as a persecuted Jew, fashioned operas and symphonic works in a style not derived from the Germans.

Brubeck wishes to join the pantheon of great, western composers, even as Milhaud seeks to escape them. For both, choral and symphonic writing reveals, unwittingly, their innermost attitudes toward western art music — Brubeck thumbing his nose at it until he is asked to join the club; Milhaud thumbing his nose at it and wishing to start a new dub altogether.

These are, of course, exaggerated suggestions that do not allow for the inevitable ambiguity in determining why one composer chooses one style and another chooses a different style. After all, Milhaud embraced western art music, even much music composed by Germans, and Brubeck writes serious oratorios and cantatas in order to express deeply held religious convictions, and because he simply loves Bach. But it is as significant as it is ironic that the classical composer Milhaud gave jazzman Brubeck the courage to write extended contrapuntal pieces.

Open To The World

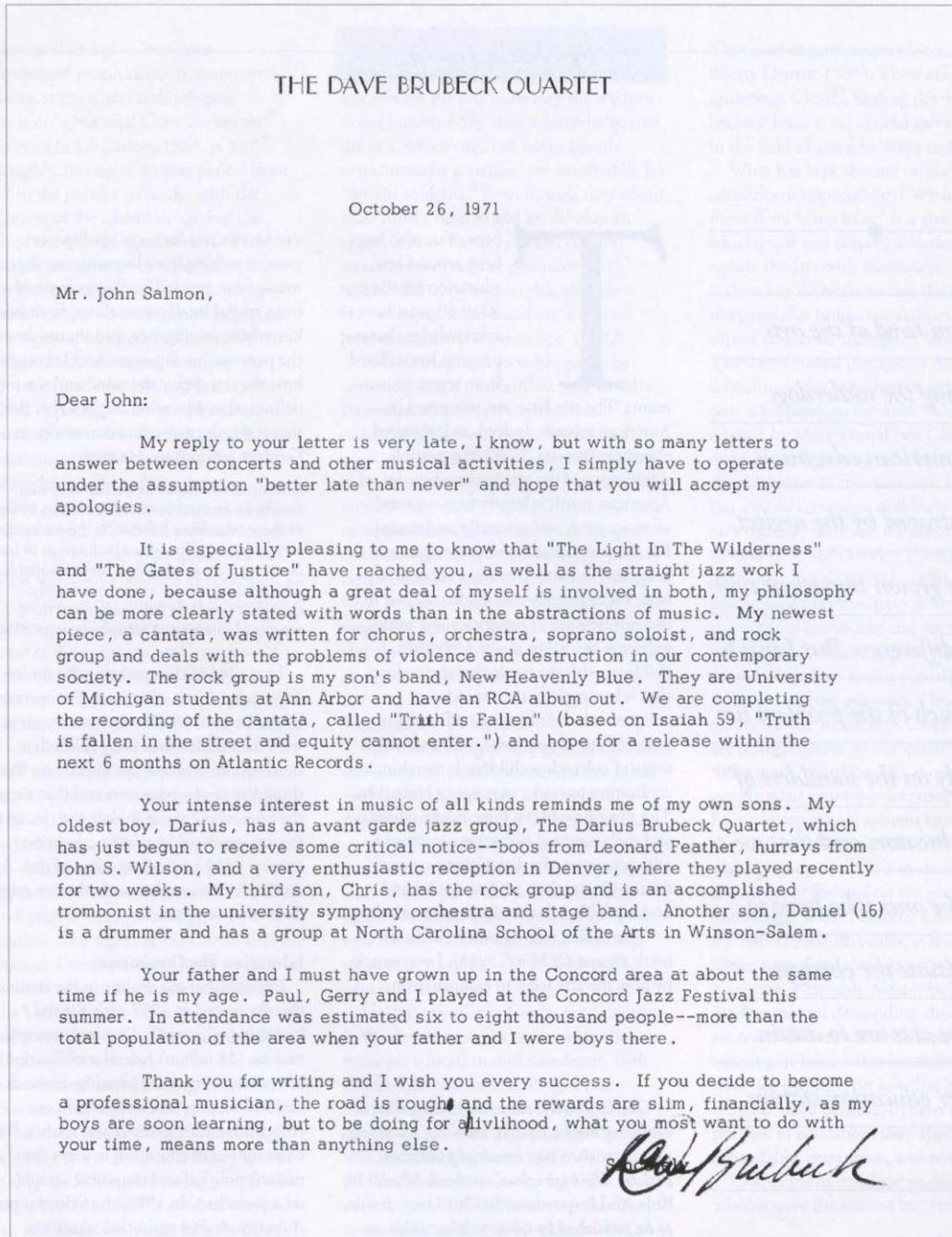
Milhaud also contributed to Brubeck's multicultural perspective. Brubeck writes, "Milhaud always told me to keep my ears as well as my eyes open while touring the world, and to be cognizant of the various sounds, rhythms and fragments of melody that envelop us night and day. — Milhaud loved to draw on Hebraic melodies (Chants populaires Hebraïques) and African-American melodies (Chansons de Negress). Brubeck mixed the two ethnic sources in his cantata, *Gates of justice*, in which the tenor soloist's melodies are derived from Jewish cantor songs and the baritone soloist's melodies are derived from Negro spirituals. Milhaud captured the syncopated sassiness of Harlem in *La creation du monde*, and the bright, blaring street life of Rio de Janeiro in *Le boeuf sur le toit*. Brubeck captured the lonely, modal melodies of a middle-eastern piper in "Nomad" (from the album, *Jazz Impressions of Eurasia*) and the serene mysticism of a Zen master in "Rising Sun" (from the album, *Jazz Impressions of Japan*).

From this multicultural diversity, it is a small step to propose that Milhaud, who escaped Nazi persecution, contributed to Brubeck's pronounced social consciousness. From the beginning of Brubeck's career, he has been a vocal opponent of racial injustice and a supporter of human rights around the world. His first musical piece to express these ideas was *The Real Ambassadors*, a musical revue with Louis Armstrong singing the title role. Brubeck, a white man, was treated differently from his black counterparts on jazz tours during the 1950s and pre-civil rights 1960s. The history of jazz is, unfortunately, also the history of racism, and Brubeck sought to sensitize people to these injustices and institute change wherever possible.

Milhaud's character spilled over into his students. In an age of cynicism, Milhaud remained intensely interested in all forms of human expression, even those outside his own aesthetic, Bill Smith said, "Milhaud helped you to become a better composer, no matter what your bent — twelve-tone, atonal, jazz or whatever." Milhaud was a humanist and a sybarite, a man of culture who loved life. He had every reason to become misanthropic — his family and race nearly suffered extinction, and he was confined to a wheelchair with a crippling disease most of his life — yet, he remained happy and hopeful.

Brubeck, like many of Milhaud's students, retains his master's openness, humanity and generosity — unusual characteristics for a celebrity. Instead of being aloof, Brubeck is warm and gracious. Instead of being arrogant, Brubeck is approachable. A letter Brubeck wrote many years ago to a sixteen-year-old fan proves this better than any second-hand reports. (See Brubeck's Letter on p. 29.)

Brubeck has given much encouragement and support to many musicians over the years, and he has vigorously promoted his ethical ideals in his works and his life. Perhaps these are the most valuable things any teacher can give a student. That is what Brubeck got from Milhaud. And that is what I got from Brubeck.



Notes

1. Telephone conversation with the author, March 22, 1991.
2. From liner notes to the recording of Brubeck's oratorio *The Light In The Wilderness*. Decca DXSA 7202.
3. Telephone conversation with the author, March 25, 1991.
4. From the preface to Brubeck's *Reminiscences Of The Cattle Country* for piano solo. (Associated Music Publishers, 1980.)
5. Telephone conversation with the author, April 2, 1991.
6. Telephone conversation with the author, March 22, 1991.
7. From the collection of Brubeck pieces *The 1987 Dave Brubeck Quartet: Blue Rondo*, (Miami: Columbia Pictures Publications, 1987), 12.
8. Telephone conversation with the author, April 2, 1991.