“Special Delivery”
Eddie Daniels’s clarinet solo on “Air Mail Special” (by Luca Luciano)

One of the most appreciated clarinetists in the world performs Benny Goodman’s favourite “Air Mail Special”. This solo has been transcribed from a track included in the album “Benny Rides Again” in quintet, co-produced with the vibraphone-player Gary Burton, as a keen homage to Benny Goodman and Lionel Hampton. Many clarinetists, not only jazz ones, have been studying Daniels’s style as a fine combination of focus, mastering of the instrument and a touch typical of a classical instrumentalist and the instinct, creativity and “drive” typical of an inspired improviser. This solo will not disappoint his fans.

This transcription is for an advanced players and it is written for a “Bb” instrument. The key in which the tune is performed on the recording is different from the one that can be found on some “Real Books” or “Jazz Fake Books”: it is in “D” instead of “C”. Changing the key of a tune is common practice in jazz music and it can happen for a variety of reasons. Besides the obvious ones (e.g. playing the tune in a more comfortable key, which may not apply to this particular instance), one of the main reasons is to find a key that either suits the style of the player or his tone, as some tunes may sound too high (and therefore too bright) or too low or can be interpreted better in a key that gives, for example, the chance to play different sections of the tune on a different register of the instrument. In the specific case of an album like the abovementioned with many tunes in keys with one or two flats/sharps only, the change of key would serve the purpose of avoiding to play always in the same key.

We can start our analysis with the use of the glissando/portamento. What was once a great weapon of clarinetists (and saxophonists like Johnny Hodges) of the past (see the “swing era”) it is, in this solo, almost absent. The (jazz) clarinet excursus has seen the techniques used developing during the years from players like Sydney Bechet (whose glissando and, most of all, vibrato was renowned all around the world) via Woody Herman and Benny Goodman and passed through players like Buddy DeFranco an Jimmy Giuffre and sees Daniels as a logical continuation. One can notice a clear idea behind many of Daniels’s solos, mainly on albums like “Breakthrough”, that critics would categorise as “third stream”, where the absence of techniques associated with Hot Jazz, Dixieland, etc is justified. Reducing what feels almost like an abuse (more than a use) of the glissando and the vibrato (so dear to players like Sidney Bechet and clarinetists of the past), playing with a more centred, purer tone with the right dosage of vibrato only when needed, replacing the glissando with a chromatic scale (as on this solo), exploiting the whole extension of the instrument without limiting oneself to the register with the speaker key, emphasising the whole dynamic range of the instrument, would give the instrumentalist the chance to face the whole of the 20th century and contemporary repertoire (including Stockhausen, Berio and contemporary improvised music) with a technique that feels more suited for the music of today. In other words, instead of remaining stuck with the jazz styles of more than a century ago, a clarinetist can either embrace the post-modernist movement or overcome the latter and being equipped to be a 21st century musician. As better expressed by the intellectual Umberto Eco: “...a postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his 20th century modernist parents or his 19th century post-modernist grandparents, he has the first half of our century behind his back but not as a burden on his shoulders”[1]. And, paraphrasing his comments on post-modernism, we could say that a musician of the 21st century could be someone who "neither repudiates nor imitates either his modernist or post-modernist parents and has the music of the past centuries behind his back but not as a burden on his shoulders”.

For most part of the solo, Daniels stays within an octave and a half, hardly going under the “B” on the third line. This is one of the main issues encountered on clarinet solos on up-tempo or in situations where the instrument is somehow out-powered by other instruments (e.g. when playing with a in a big band or accompanied by a loud rhythm section). Therefore the chance to explore and emphasize darker tones and/or the lower register is quite limited forcing the player to stay on a brighter and louder register of the clarinet which may turn up to be, in the long run, counterproductive or, even, monotonous. This point can also be related to the idea of the clarinet excursus we mentioned earlier. The repertoire part of the so called Western-European tradition has wisely used two great features of the clarinet: an extension almost unparalleled by any other wind instrument; a dynamic range capable of going from a pianissimo that can be barely heard to a fortissimo that can fill a concert hall with a quickness that is, again, almost unparalleled by other instruments (not only woodwinds). The absence of this two main features of the instrument not only forces the player to a short solo (in this case only two choruses), but prevents him from achieving the aesthetic goals of post-modernism also because as there is really no “ ironic and innocent revision of the earlier styles” (as suggested by Eco, Op. cit.).

The chord progression of this piece is a kind of “rhythm change” in the “A Section” where “D” is mainly meant as a “D7″ and the original chord progression is then played on the “B Section”. The rhythm change (along with the blues form) is the bread and butter of any jazz player and this arrangement serves the purpose of “personalising” the tune in a way and works well at this tempo as many jazz virtuosos do play the rhythm change quite fast. Many jazz instrumentalists would also play the rhythm change in “C” (concert “Bb”), which gives another good reason for changing the key of this specific tune. As it often happens, such a tempo forces players (including Daniels) to an approach that is mainly tonal and often diatonic with some intervals of a third here and there mainly part of arpeggios. During some sections, though, like the “B section” of the first chorus, he uses a chromatic passage and on bar 9-12 the chords |D7 EbMaj | G7 | Cmin7 G7 | D D7 | maybe intended as superimposed material by the melodist, as on bar 33-36 the chords | D | Cmin7 | D7 G | E7 A7| can also be intended as superimpositions.

Note how he begins and ends the solo using the pentatonic scale built on the main key. This may serve the purpose of building up the solo using scales with less notes at the beginning and then take the solo to the next level with scales of seven and eight notes, playing then passages with more pitches before drying the solo up and fade it out. It also serves the purpose of compensating more dissonant materials that a soloist may play introducing more consonant material to release the tension. It is exactly this “tension and release basis” that the saxophonist and educator David Leibman so eloquently explains (Liebman, 1991:13) that is part of not only every great solo (and a distinctive feature of a mature improviser), but, in wider terms, of a great work of art.
It is worth noting how he strictly adheres to the diminished arpeggio on bar 17-20 and again in bar 49-51. It would also raise the question as to why it chooses to do so. Most probably it serves the purpose of compensating the “A Section” (where he mainly plays diatonic material) and the use of dissonances on bars 52-54 where he emphasizes the major seventh on diminished 7th chords. Classically trained clarinettist may notice how this material (i.e. diminished seventh arpeggio) has been widely used in this fashion (i.e. in the form of a diminished arpeggio with or without jumps of a third) in compositions for clarinet by Mozart and Weber, just to mention but two. This point can also be connected to the excursus we were mentioning earlier (and somehow extend it in order to accommodate the improvisers/instrumentalists of 18th and 19th century) as the original scores of both Mozart’s and Weber’s concertos demonstrate how much the clarinet virtuosos of those days added in terms of cadenzas, embellishments, articulations, etc. Those who have a deeper knowledge of jazz and classical music know very well that many talented musicians of the past (Mozart, Domenico Scarlatti, Paganini, Chopin, etc) were all-around musicians and, of course, excellent improvisers. So it is only natural that musicians like Woody Herman or Benny Goodman (generally categorised as jazz players) not only were involved with classical music, but also commissioned (and premiered) compositions written by Stravinsky, Copland, Poulenc that are now part of the repertoire of the majority of classical virtuosos all around the world just as instrumentalists like Daniels are excellent classical player themselves (see the album with the “Trio di Clarone” for instance) and have premiered new compositions too. It is interesting what in fact Copland himself has to say about the cadenza on his clarinet concerto (written for Goodman) and how he “felt there was enough room for interpretation even when everything is written out” [2]. Many jazz educators, like Liebman (Liebman, 1991:63), concur that composing is nothing more than “improvisation slowed down” and therefore it is only natural that the same harmonic/melodic material used in the so-called classical music is also used in the so-called jazz music as it belongs to music regardless of the “label” that critics, aestheticians or scholars have put on that specific kind of music [3].

Another typical approach to jazz improvisation is used on this solo with great mastery: the use of a minor third (the so called “blue note”) during the last eight bars of the first chorus. The blues scale is another important part of the jazz and blues tradition and even boppers like Parker (and this solo is definitely sounds bop) used it with great efficiency and never abandoned it. Daniels emphasizes even more the blues scale in bar 45-48 where also a flattened fifth is present. Musicians and educators like Liebman (Liebman, 1991:11) see in the blue note (as the superimposition of a minor third over a chord that actually includes a major third) the beginning of a process (within the so-called jazz music) that will develop over the years and will lead to more chromatic clashes, more ambitious superimpositions, stronger dissonances and, eventually, to what Schoenberg defined as the “emancipation of the dissonance” [4]. It was actually thanks to the be-bop movement that the chromatic clashes used on the blues scale were conceptualised as part of an upper structured chord. That also explains why on this transcription the dominant seven chords, even when clearly altered by the players, are still written without specifying the alterations.

In conclusion, what I think this solo really shows (and therefore the lesson that can be learnt from it) is the great equilibrium that Eddie Daniels has in his playing. It is remarkable how he is able to keep the instrument always under control, play with such a focus (above all on the tone) without holding back on his creativity and instinct. Not only he has the ability of playing with such a drive and energy without losing the focus, but, as shown by our harmonic and melodic analysis, he shows the ability of balancing so well the material he uses with attention to the tension-release-basis in real time and therefore produce a solo that makes the listener want to ask for more.

for an analysis on the role of critics see “Guide to Aesthetics” by Benedetto Croce (Hackett Publishing Company, 1995)
Arnold Schoenberg’s 1926 essay “Opinion or Insight?”

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Discography

- “Benny Rides Again”, Eddie Daniel & Gary Burton (GRP Records, 1992)
- “Blues for Sabine”, Sabine Meyer & Eddie Daniels (EMI, 1995)
- “Breakthrough”, Eddie Daniels with the Philharmonia Orchestra (GRP Records, 1990)
- “Hark”, Buddy DeFranco meets the Oscar Peterson Quartet (Pablo Records 1985)
Air Mail Special

Eddie Daniels's solo

Bebop 270

Clarinet in Bb

D  Em7  A7  D7

Em7  A7  D7  G7  (G7b5)  (F7)  (B7)

Em7  (A7)  D  Em7  A7  D7

Em7  E7b5  D7  G7  (G7b5)  Em7  A7

D  D97

D97  C97  C97  Bb7

A7  D7  Em7  A7  D7  Em7  A7

D7  G7  Gdim7  Em7  A7  ("A" pedal)

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