

Darius Milhaud's "Trois chansons de négresse"

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Abstract: Darius Milhaud's song cycle "Trois chansons de négresse" (1935-1936) is a captivating exploration of African and African American experiences through the lenses of history, emotion, and resilience. Drawing inspiration from the poems of Jules Supervielle, Milhaud crafts a narrative arc that begins with the historical perspective of enslavement in "Mon histoire," delves into the intimate analysis of abandonment in "Abandonnée," and concludes with a celebration of community and emotional support amidst displacement in "Sans feu ni lieu." Milhaud's distinctive compositional techniques, including polytonality, syncopated rhythms, and dynamic contrasts, are masterfully employed to convey the depth and complexity of the subject matter.

This paper investigates the musical elements and their emotional impact in each song, focusing on tempo, melodic development, rhythmic patterns, harmonic language, and the relationship between voice and piano. The analysis reveals how Milhaud's musical choices, such as the use of irregular time signatures, harmonic modulations, and contrapuntal textures, contribute to the vivid portrayal of the poems' themes and emotions. Additionally, the paper explores the significance of this song cycle in promoting racial equality, cultural diversity, and the integration of African American music into classical repertoire.

Milhaud's "Trois chansons de négresse" stands as a powerful testament to the resilience and cultural richness of African and African American experiences, inviting listeners to engage with these stories and fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

Key words: Darius Milhaud, "Trois chansons de négresse," song cycle, African American music, polytonality, syncopation, cultural diversity, resilience, emotional impact.

Darius Milhaud worked as a conductor, composer, and teacher. He was one of the most renowned French composers of the 20th century, and his body of work includes a diverse array of musical genres and styles. He was the leader of the small group of radical Parisians known as the "Groupe des Six," who championed neoclassicism and aimed to reject the prevalent romantic trends in France at the time.¹ Based on his studies at the Paris Conservatoire, where he received academic training in polytonality, Milhaud traveled to several countries between 1917 and 1922, including the United States, Brazil, England, Italy, Poland, Austria, and Holland.² Polytonality, rhythmic liveliness, and a combination of many cultural elements marked his music, making him a pioneer in bridging the gap between classical and popular music.³

In the midst of the artistic and cultural experimentation of the 1920s and 1930s, Milhaud produced the captivating "Trois chansons de négresse" (Three Songs of a Negro Woman), Op. 148b, in 1935-1936. Three art songs for solo voice and orchestra are included in the song cycle, each based on poetry by Franco-Uruguayan poet and writer Jules Supervielle.

Early 20th-century art underwent significant development, particularly in France. In order to convey their passionate musical ideas and break free from the strict romantic conventions, composers were searching for fresh avenues. Milhaud was heavily affected during this period by his contacts with jazz and Brazilian music while traveling in the United States and Brazil.⁴ He was captivated by folk and jazz music's syncopated rhythms and inventive harmonies, and he inspired and absorbed these aspects into his own works.

Different cultures influenced Milhaud, allowing him to absorb them, assimilate them,

¹ Milhaud, Darius. "The Evolution of Modern Music in Paris and in Vienna." *The North American Review* 217, no. 809 (1923): 544. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112995>

² Milhaud, Darius. "The Evolution of Modern Music in Paris and in Vienna." *The North American Review* 217, no. 809 (1923): 552. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112995>.

³ Clifford Towner and Ryan Johnson, "TWO MARCHES BY DARIUS MILHAUD," *Journal of Band Research* 53, no. 2 (2018): 34, Troy University.

⁴ Darius Milhaud, "The Evolution of Modern Music in Paris and in Vienna," *The North American Review* 217, no. 809 (1923): 551, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112995>.

and interpret or use them afterwards within his own musical language.⁵ Milhaud delves into African and African American culture in "*Trois chansons de négresse*" by using Supervielle's lyrics as a canvas for his musical expression. The cycle keeps the rich imagery of the poems while introducing his distinctive polytonality and rhythmic intensity.

In my paper, I will dig into many details of Darius Milhaud's "*Trois chansons de négresse*" in solo voice and piano version by following along in the score published by Salabert editions in 1998. I will be exploring the lyric, tempo, melodic, rhythmic, and thematic material. I will also be exploring the song cycle's harmonic language, examining formal structure, reviewing the significant recording, and the relationship between voice and piano. Furthermore, I am going to investigate the composition's impact, as well as potential influences and inspirations.

The cycle is inspired by poet Jules Supervielle, and all three songs deal with themes of identity, displacement, and the need for belonging. The first song, "*Mon histoire*" (My story), the text reflects on the story of an African who was kidnapped from Africa as a slave, according to English translations from "*The LiederNet archive*" by Faith J. Cormier. For example, in the first song, the lyrics "*J'étais tout petit quand un grand négrier, cachant la vérité, me fit venir d'Afrique*" (I was very small when a tall slavetrader, hiding the truth, brought me from Africa.)⁶, which highlights the slave-trader's deception, as the person carried from Africa without knowing the truth about their enslavement. In addition, the text concludes with a proclamation of liberty and equality. The phrase, "*Maintenant on est libre*" (Now we're totally free)⁷ signals a defining moment in the person's and their fellow African Americans' lives. The text that follows emphasizes the equality of African Americans and white people, addressing racial prejudice and injustice. "*La jambe par devant, la jambe par derrière*" (One leg before, one leg behind)⁸ represents forward progress and unity between African Americans and white people.

The second song "*Abandonnée*" (Abandoned) depicts the deep emotional abandonment and loneliness. The lyric begins, "*En attendant je serai à la maison toute seule, sans avoir un seul baiser à me mettre sous la gueule.*" (Till then, I'll be all alone in the house, without a single kiss.)⁹ These phrases quickly establish the person's emotional distress as he prepares to be alone without the comfort of affection or friendship. The repeated use of the word "alone" emphasizes the speaker's isolation.

The last song, "*Sans feu ni lieu*" (With neither hearth nor home), begins by recognizing the essential necessity for a home, particularly for vulnerable and dependent children. It begins, "*Pour les enfants sans feu ni lieu*" (For the children with neither hearth nor home),¹⁰ highlighting the issue of homelessness and the difficulties that these children encounter being homeless. The lyric addresses the importance of emotional support and unity among individuals facing similar challenges. It implies that the song's verses can reassure these children that they are not as alone as they may feel loneliness, especially in the face of problems such as "*Même au milieu de la montagne*" (even amidst mountains)¹¹ and "*Et de la guerre et de l'hiver.*" (And war and winter)¹².

Collectively, these three poems build a narrative arc that begins with a historical perspective on enslavement, moves into a highly intimate analysis of abandonment, and then broadens to emphasize the resilience and emotional support found in a community experiencing displacement. Milhaud integrated three of Supervielle's poems into a vocal cycle, which offers an in-depth consideration of the African and African American experience through the lenses of history, emotion, and resilience.

The significance of preserving perfect proportions and a solid and logical architecture in every piece of music, as Milhaud highlighted in a 1969 interview regarding his experimentation with innovation. This song cycle demonstrates that he practiced this in his vocal works. He was rigorous in terms of structure as well as

⁵ Deborah Mawer, "Darius Milhaud Modality & Structure in Music of the 1920s" (Aldershot: Scolar press, 1997), 113.

⁶ "Mon histoire," The LiederNet Archive, accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=15498.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Mon histoire," The LiederNet Archive, accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=15498.

⁹ "Abandonnée," The LiederNet Archive, accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=15500.

¹⁰ "Sans feu ni lieu," The LiederNet Archive, accessed September 26, 2023, https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=15502.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

techniques used within a song, such as tempo placement and rhythmic patterns, layered tonalities, thematic material, and melodic development.¹³

"*Mon histoire*" (My story) is a joyous and jazz-infused piece with vibrant syncopation that exudes the feeling of freedom in the opening song. The tempo marker "*Très vif*" and time signature 2/2 implies that the performance is at a very quick tempo. "*Mon histoire*" follows the binary form, with the first section (mm.1-38) introduces the theme and the second section (mm.39-58) brings familiarity and shapes a wonderful ending.

Rhythmically, syncopation is a prominent feature in "*Mon histoire*." The rhythmic organization that consists of syncopated notes goes from beginning to end. The rhythmic organization pattern of syncopated notes plus eighth notes after two bars supports singers in sustaining rhythm and adjusting breathing when singing to certain extents. This matches with narrations of musical phrases.

The composer skillfully employs the first eight bars (mm.3-10) as the motive and the main melodic line in the arrangement of the melody. It is possible to strengthen the thematic substance and give the song a sense of coherence by using specific recurring motifs in the melody and quick changes in the harmony. Through analysis, for instance, the tonality of the phrase presented the first modulation of the theme motive. This occurred when the tonality switched from the key of A major at the beginning to the melodic theme of F sharp major from bars 15 to 18 (see P.1), and then it was found that the transfer to G major occurred in bars 23 to 26 (see P.2). These melodies are designed to be catchy and captivating in order to complement the vocal style of the song. They enable the vocalist to properly communicate the poem's feelings and story.

P.1¹⁴:

The image shows a page of a musical score for the song "Mon histoire" by Darius Milhaud. It features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains measures 12, 13, 14, and 15. The second system contains measures 16, 17, and 18. Handwritten annotations in blue ink are present: bar numbers 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18 are written above the vocal line. A key signature change to F# major (F# M) is indicated above measure 15. The lyrics are: "tou - - - tes Dans u - ne barque à voi - - - les Et je compris en rou - - - te Que j'é - tais une es - - cla - ve!". The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *f*.

P.2:¹⁵

¹³ Natoma Nash Noble, "The Neoclassic Aesthetic in Two Early Song Cycles by Darius Milhaud" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1981), 87.

<http://login.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertationtheses/neoclassic-aesthetic-two-early-song-cycles-darius/docview/303209675/se-2>.

¹⁴ Darius Milhaud, *Chansons de pour chant et piano* (Paris: Salabert Editions, 1998), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

From a harmonic standpoint, the song has a distinctive sound that is enhanced by the frequent use of harmonic language outside of major and minor keys, which creates a lively and deeply moving musical environment for the poem's narrative. For example, Milhaud begins the opening section (mm.1-14) in the key of A major and uses lively speed to produce a bright and energetic stylistic ambiance. The harmony switches to F sharp major (mm.15-18), A major (mm.19-22) and G major (mm.23-26) in the developing section. F major (mm.31-32) (mm.43-46) establishes motifs and melodic themes through variations and development before returning to the initial key of A major. The composer skillfully used two bars as a group as the core material of the collaborative piano and repeated the rhythmical pattern according to the part of the piano accompaniment. The rhythmic ostinato's compositional approaches not only contributed steadily to the song's tempo but also emphasized the singer's emotional expressiveness of the music.

In "Mon histoire", harmonic modulation is used to expand the piece's harmonic palette in the rhythmic ostinato pattern, adding to its specific character. It complements the song's cultural and thematic themes, producing a sound that is both engaging and evocative of the African and African American experience.

The second piece in this cycle, "Abandonnée" (Abandoned), has a moderate tempo. In contrast to the quick and lively tempo of the first song, the speed of this song must be sung at a moderate tempo, and different emotional tones of the song are laid through the comparison of different tempos. The tempo of the second song allows the singer the time and space to deliver the words with depth, bringing out the speaker's struggle with emotion and sadness, making the music more story-like and narrative. Meanwhile, the moderate tempo accompanies the music's lyrical and expressive features. It enables the performer to communicate with the terrible sense of abandonment and sadness conveyed in the poem. In the vocal composition, the time signature is set erratically. The 7/8-time signature makes estimating the song much more difficult.¹⁶ Personally, singers and collaboration pianists must become acquainted with both sides of the study and be comfortable listening and talking during rehearsals. The use of an irregular time signature, the time signature 7/8, can give the performer expressive opportunities. It enables complex rhythmic phrasing and accentuation of specific beats, boosting the emotional perception of the song while also providing opportunities to deal with rubato in specific locations.

The work was written primarily in B-flat Major. It was made up of four thematic phrases and one ending that ascended by two scales. The four thematic phrases are mm.3-9, mm.13-19, mm.23-29, and mm.33-39. It is worth noting that the feature of melodic ostinato is quite distinctive in this composition. For example, once the opening phrase establishes the motif for the entire work, the remaining three vocal line and piano accompaniment phrases are repeated. Also, the four flowing phrases give the singer possibilities for expressive phrasing and interpretation, especially while singing the text in the same melody, which contributes to the emphasis of text delivery.

The piano accompaniment that bridges these four phrases is an additional characteristic of this composition. In my opinion, the three connecting parts complete three transitions with the same rhythmical pattern material. These three transitions have been referred to as D-flat Major (see P.3), D Major (see P.4), and E-flat Major (see P.5), and they transform the harmony in an ascending minor second. As a piano interlude, the composer employs elements in three distinct keys, expanding the harmony in the same melodic theme, boosting the intrigue of the phrase, and contributing to the emotional evolution of the lyrics.

P.3:¹⁷

¹⁶ Jeremiah Abimbola, Daniel Kostrzewa, and Pawel Kasproski, "Time Signature Detection: A Survey," *Sensors* 21, no. 19 (2021): 6494.

¹⁷ Darius Milhaud, *Chansons de pour chant et piano* (Paris: Salabert Editions, 1998), 6.



P.4:¹⁸



P.5:¹⁹



At the end of the song, the final two phrases of the singer's scale up the last lyrics, and then the piano based on the original two phrases of the solo octave to finish the work. This octave interactions are tied to the musical effect, and the piano work is like an echo of the singer's final singing. The ecclesiastical modes of Greek origin, including Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, and Lorian, are also included in Milhaud's modality.²⁰ This unique characteristic can be seen at the end of the song. It's interesting to note that both sets of scales, which use B-flat major as their respective ascending Dorian and Ionian modes (see P.6).
P.6:²¹

¹⁸ Darius Milhaud, *Chansons de pour chant et piano* (Paris: Salabert Editions, 1998), 7.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Deborah Mawer, "Darius Milhaud Modality & Structure in Music of the 1920S" (Aldershot: Scolar press, 1997), 253.

²¹ Darius Milhaud, *Chansons de pour chant et piano* (Paris: Salabert Editions, 1998), 8.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics: "Don-ner mon sein de cou-leur" and "A no-tre pe-tit gar-çon". Below it is a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The second system shows a piano solo in treble clef, with handwritten blue annotations "Dorian:" and "Ionian:" above the staff. Yellow highlights are placed under specific melodic phrases in the piano solo. The piano accompaniment continues below the solo.

Generally, Milhaud used the irregular 7/8 rhythm to create a space for the singer and the accompanying piano to freely explore and express their emotions on this premise through the investigation of all components of the second song, "Abandonnée". The three modulations in the piano connecting part drive and support the singer's emotional expression while also promoting the emotional agony and turbulence portrayed in the poem. Together, these musical components produce a moving and emotional interpretation of the text. Milhaud employs a rich musical tapestry to express the ideas of displacement, community, and togetherness described in the poem in the third song of this cycle, "Sans feu ni lieu" (With neither hearth nor home). First, the dynamic contrast is one of this work's characteristics. "Sans Feu Ni Lieu" has subtle swells and fades in the dynamics. The duration of this composition is short overall, but the composer employs "pp", "p", "mp", "mf", and "f" dynamical markings. These dynamic variations can evoke a sense of emotional intensity, particularly during the final phrase's moments of group jubilation and unification (mm.19-25). The music is developed to climactic points, highlighting the community's overall strength.

Utilizing contrapuntal texture, where many melodic lines interact and entwine, is another aspect when several melodic lines interact and intertwine. For instance, the piano repeats the same rhythm and harmony in the opening phrase (mm.1-5) as the vocalist introduces the melody. At the end of the phrase (mm.5), the accompaniment breaks the repetition and prepares a downscale transition to the next phrase. Parallel polyphonic melody is developed by the vocalist and piano in the development phrase of mm.10-16, but the piano accompaniment adds bass and alto lines to heighten the feeling of sound hierarchy. The community demonstrated by the poem is interwoven and united in this contrapuntal poetry. It appears every voice - whether vocal or the collaborative piano - contributes to the group's overall power.

From the perspective of harmonic analysis, the introduction of the piano in g minor establishes the key to the theme. In the development section, mm.10-13 are turned into G major, mm.14-15 into e minor, mm.16 into G major, and mm.17 back to g minor (see P.7). These frequently modulated harmonies might strengthen the notion that, even in difficult circumstances, a sense of oneness and belonging can be discovered.
P.7:²²

²² Darius Milhaud, *Chansons de pour chant et piano* (Paris: Salabert Editions, 1998), 10.

The image displays a musical score for three songs by Darius Milhaud. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in the upper staff, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower staves. The score is divided into three systems, each corresponding to a different song. The first system (measures 9-11) is in G major (G M:). The second system (measures 12-14) is in E minor (e m:). The third system (measures 15-17) is in G major (G M:). The lyrics are in French. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, dynamics (p, f), and articulation marks. Handwritten blue annotations are present, including measure numbers (9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17) and key signatures (G M:, e m:). A blue bracket highlights a section of the piano accompaniment in measure 14.

As previously said, the dramatic swells, contrapuntal texture of melodies, and harmonic modulations contribute the piece's emotional expressiveness, resulting in a strong and compelling rendition of the text. The result is a musical depiction of hope, community, and the enduring spirit of those without a home.

Based on the characteristics of this cycle, my favorite interpretation of the recording was sung by mezzo-soprano Sarah Daughtrey, accompanied by pianist Justin Badgerow, on the album "A touch of Blue", which was released on March 18, 2022, by NAXO of America.²³ First, the singer and the pianist were very careful to catch the emotional tone of each recording because the three songs have quite diverse subjects. The recording portrays the depth of sentiment and storytelling in each song, portraying the themes of struggle, abandonment, and community. Besides, in a cycle like "Trois chansons de négresse," it's critical that the recording preserves a feeling of coherence throughout the three pieces. Each song is only a few minutes long, but it contains three distinct short stories. I can more fully appreciate the actors' overall fluidity, natural transitions, and emotional connections by listening to the entire cycle from beginning to end. They seamlessly transition from one to the next, forming a cohesive story and emotional journey. Finally, I believe the most

²³ Darius Milhaud, 3 Chansons de négresse, with mezzo-soprano Sarah Daughtrey and piano Justin Badgerow, released March 18, A touch of blue, 2022, album by NAXO of America.

crucial thing to determine if the performers respect the composition. When I returned to the score while listening to the recording, it suitably arranged the three songs in different dynamic range, the rhythm and harmonic changes were very clear, the singing and piano were in a very balanced state, and the textual clarity was also very clear in expression. Also, the use of rubato is within reasonable norms.

As a pianist, the relationship between the voice and piano is an essential component that considerably contributes to the overall effect and interpretation of the composition. Here are three specific considerations for the interaction between the voice and piano portions in Milhaud's "*Trois chansons de négresse*."

First and foremost, these three songs are centered on various emotional tones. The piano and vocal sounds must have ranged levels of contrast and balance in order to express the story and content behind each composition more effectively. In the first song, "*Mon histoire*," for example, the singer takes on the role of a speaker, narrating the story and stating the theme from the beginning, which demands the piano controlling the force to stabilize the speed and enhance the emotion, as well as the narrative development of the lyrics to highlight the singer's melody line. While the general mood of "*Abandonnée*," the second piece, is relatively calm and mournful, the piano part gives controlled and light support at this moment. The third work, "*Sans feu ni lieu*," has more extreme emotional colors than the first two, and the composer clearly indicates the shift in dynamics and intensity at the end of the song. This implies the establishment of a reasonable and balanced range of dynamics between the voice and the piano as well as the free relaxation of each part to establish a clear contrast and better highlight the theme.

Rhythmic synchronicity is the second important factor to consider. The usage of a lot of syncopated rhythm is what all three songs have in similarity. In some ways, syncopated rhythm makes it harder for musicians and singers to identify the downbeat. It's crucial to pay attention to the rhythmic relationship between the vocal and piano whilst rehearsing. In order to properly control the tempo, the pianist must also learn to interpret vocalists' breathing patterns while developing rubato for particular phrases. Overall, keeping the flow and vitality of the music depends on clarity in rhythmic coordination.

Thirdly, the collaborative pianist needs to approach the instrumental solo passages with extreme sensitivity. Milhaud included piano solo passages in the piano part. These portions, which serve as reflection moments like the end of the two scales of the second work or the transition between vocal sections like the solo piano throughout the first and second sections of the first song, should be performed musically and sensitively. In conclusion, "*Trois chansons de négresse*" by Darius Milhaud is a remarkable musical illustration of the tenacity, adversity, and cultural diversity of the African and African American cultures. This composition's significance comes from its capacity to accurately represent the complexity and depth of the subject matter. The three songs "*Mon histoire*," "*Abandonnée*," and "*Sans Feu Ni Lieu*," each have distinct emotional and narrative underpinnings. "*Mon histoire*" covers the transition from slavery to freedom, "*Abandonnée*" focuses on motherhood and loneliness, and "*Sans Feu Ni Lieu*" shows the resiliency and harmony of a community of refugees. These three songs, which reflect the history and culture of Africa and in a variety of African American ways, have attracted the attention and resonance of more listeners, and have played a part in promoting racial equality and respect for different cultures around the world. In terms of influence and inspiration, the composer skillfully employs the unusual, syncopated rhythm throughout the entire piece, which adds to the work's appeal and intrigue. And the complex harmonic language adds to the song's narrative and depth. Using this piece as an example, Milhaud supplied and introduced new ideas for subsequent generations of composers through his distinct composing perspective, while also promoting the expansion and integration of African American music.

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