

AN INTERVIEW WITH WARREN BENSON

by Dr. Charles Rochester Young
Saxophone Symposium Spring 1998

Warren Benson is certainly one of the most thought-provoking and distinguished proponents of the Saxophone. He has championed the instrument's continual development throughout his career as a composer, performer, conductor, and pedagogue.

Warren Benson was born in 1924 in Detroit and studied Percussion and Horn as a child. He attended Cass Technical High School in Detroit, and later pursued his Bachelor and Master degrees in Music Theory at the University of Michigan, where he played Horn in the orchestra and taught Percussion. After completing his studies, Benson became Timpanist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, playing under Bernstein, Ormandy, and Reiner among others.

In 1950, Benson was awarded the first of two successive Fulbright Fellowships to Greece where he taught at Anatolia College and founded the Anatolia College Chorale, the first co-educational school choir in Greece (a group which is still in existence).

He returned to the United States in 1952 to conduct the orchestra and band activities as Mars Hill College in North Carolina. In the following year, he joined the faculty at Ithaca College in New York, where he was the Composer-In-Residence and the Percussion teacher. While in Ithaca, he founded the Department of Music History and Literature, formed the first Percussion ensemble on the East Coast (the second in the nation), and oversaw the Ford Foundation Contemporary Music Project, the first pilot project in Comprehensive Musicianship.

In September, 1967, Benson became Professor of Composition at the Eastman School of Music. In 1971, he received the Lillian Fairchild Prize for Composition and in 1976, he received the Citation of Excellence from the National Band Association. In 1980-81, he was named as The Kilbourn Professor at the Eastman School of Music and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Warren Benson has continually lectured at leading United States festivals and in Canada, Latin America and Europe. His music has been performed in over thirty-five countries, with thirty works of his having been recorded, and over one hundred having been published. Benson has also served as a music advisor for the United States Information Agency, a lecturer for the United States Information Services Library, a consultant to *Voice of America* and received the awarded the Diploma of Honor from the Argentinian Ministry of Culture in 1970. He has received numerous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and has received Serious Music Awards from ASCAP annually since 1960.

This interview took place in 1992.

Young: You're quite well known as a prolific composer of songs, Percussion music and wind music. What has been your continual fascination with these mediums?

Benson: My friends are fundamentally wind players. They made me aware of things which didn't exist in their repertoire, and I became very interested. Orchestras weren't playing new music by American composers, so I started writing more for the wind band. I think the wind band is a wonderful medium! Many consider me to be primarily a band composer, but I've actually written more works for other things than I have for bands. I'm very interested in challenging myself to do things I've never done before.

Young: Do you remember your first exposure to the Saxophone?

Benson: One of my neighbors played the Saxophone when I was quite young. He owned a Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Baritone, and Bass. I became curious about the literature, because at that point there was nothing really profound that I was aware of. In 1940, Leonard Smith gave me some recordings of the Republican Guard Band of France Saxophone Quartet which were really great. Then, Shep Fields came to Ann Arbor with his all-reed band, while I was a student at the University of Michigan in 1944. It had lots of Saxophones: several Sopranos, several Altos, two Tenors, Baritone and Bass. He had a total of twelve or thirteen saxophones with rhythm section and no brass instruments. I am continually fascinated by the history of these Jazz Saxophone ensembles from the twenties up through Supersax today. It is interesting that today there is a revival of the large saxophone ensemble, like Percy Grainger used to write for, that we have largely forgotten. I must honestly say that I am disappointed that we have such little awareness of the Bass Saxophone. One of the problems that we have in the wind ensemble is the lack of a really agile responsive projecting bass instrument. The Bass Saxophone is the most agile, possesses the most strength, and has the most fluency of all the bass instruments and yet it is neglected. This leaves an enormous hole in the bass section of the wind family.

Young: Did your early interest in Jazz lead you to compose for the Saxophone?

Benson: No. It did influence my conception of the instrument though.

Jazz players seem to be very concerned about their timbral identity. I think it's interesting that you can recognize virtually any noted Jazz Saxophone player in two or three notes, irrespective of what it is they're playing. In terms of timbre and phrasing they wouldn't want to be caught dead sounding exacting like somebody else!

I thought for many years in some areas of wind playing, there was this notion of a single "ideal" sound or "golden" tone in the sky which everyone should strive for. But, you can't play everything with the same sound! It should be like one's voice, where you change your voice quality for different modes of expression such as love or anger. Otherwise it's uninteresting, it's neutral and it has no personality. I remember Vincent Persichetti remarking to me once, "these Jazz guys really know `how' to say what it is that they're saying." I thought this was a marvelous summation of the idea. But this isn't ultimately why I wrote for the Saxophone. Sigurd Rascher is the reason that I wrote for it.

Young: How did you come to know Sigurd Rascher?

Benson: I was teaching at the Brevard Music Center in North Carolina and he was the featured artist there. He played for me and I was very interested in his Altissimo register. At that time no one was playing a lot up there. We saw a great deal of each other over the next six or seven years. We had a very good relationship as did our families. In fact, we played one of the very first performances of the Ingolf Dahl Concerto together. We performed the original version, which to me, was even stronger than the current version which is played today.

When I first came to know him, he already had over fifty concert works by composers of real stature, such as Ibert, Hindemith, and Brant. So I was very pleased when he asked me to write the Concertino. I wrote the middle movement, Aeolian Song, first in 1953 and finished the rest of the piece at the end of 1954. He premiered it in January 1955 and subsequently performed it countless number of times. Of course, the Aeolian Song has since been played hundreds and hundreds of times. The Prism Quartet now plays it on tour with their electronic wind instruments providing the accompaniment.

Young: Interesting! Are there any other versions of Aeolian Song, besides the versions for wind ensemble, piano and electronic wind instruments?

Benson: Yes, I wrote a version for Sigurd Rascher and his daughter, Carina, which had a Soprano Saxophone obligato part with the Alto solo and accompanied by orchestra or band. I don't know where it is anymore. MCA had it and sent it to Theodore Presser, but it never got there.

Young: I have heard that Aeolian Song is now out-of-print. Is this true?

Benson: Yes, it is currently out of print and I haven't placed it with anybody yet.....but I will.

Young: Aeolian Song and many of your other works require great control from the performers. Is this something we can continue to expect in your music?

Benson: Yes. I think control is very underrated. Many people have a technique that is two-thirds developed, but the refinement that takes extraordinary practice to play any dynamic in any register is largely ignored, though some like Sinta have done it. Many times you ask people to play a diminuendo to silence and they play as softly as they can and stop. I think everyone should strive only for this highest goal. You should work your entire life to play faster and slower and softer and louder, and to develop all kinds of possible vibrato. I am interested by the idea, that music doesn't have to be beautiful, but rather humanely communicative in terms of the whole range of human experience. If the musical environment is going to reflect the human condition, then the vibrato, dynamics, varieties of articulations, control of tempi, etc.. must be pushed to their fullest potential.

We've had serious scholarship into the developments in technique and new sounds by Thom David Mason, Ron Caravan, Larry Livingston, Fred Hemke and others. Don Sinta has made some astonishing accomplishments in these areas and Fred Hemke when he recorded my Dream Net learned all of those wonderful sounds that I asked for. I'm just thrilled when I see this

happen! The ultimate opportunity that a performer can offer a composer is to say "I can learn to do anything that you ask me to do."

Young: You have worked with many noted Saxophonists over the past 40 years and helped to shape the history of our instrument by creating works for many of them. Could you share with us some of your more meaningful experiences with them and how they may have changed your perspective of the instrument?

Benson: I met Fred Hemke when I was with Rascher at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Convention in Chicago, where they were doing some my early band music. I remember discussing the literature with him and later with Sinta. In 1966, I met Londeix at Interlochen while attending the first meeting of the International Society for Music Education to be held in the United States. They were performing a ballet of mine at the opening concert, and Norman Dello-Joio and I decided to take Madame Leduc and Londeix into Traverse City for dinner. Afterwards, I promised to introduce Londeix to Sinta and Jack Kripl, who was another very good friend of mine. We went to Sinta's cottage and stayed there until about three in the morning talking shop and listening to tapes.

Another close friend of mine, though not a Saxophonist, is Karel Husa. In 1954, he first came to this country to teach at Cornell in Ithaca, New York, where I was living at the time. We got together immediately and we and our families have been very close friends ever since. One night when Rascher was staying with us, we invited Karel and his family over for dinner and I introduced them. Rascher wanted to play for him, so I gave them the key to my office, and they spent several hours together. Elegie et Rondeau resulted from that. Husa and I even drove together to Rochester for the premiere.

Later, at the Saxophone Congress in Chicago, I was invited to give a speech and Londeix was there performing the American premiere of the Denisov Sonata. He played multiphonics and other extended techniques which just knocked everybody out! I also had a good time being with Rascher, Sinta, Hemke, Londeix, Rousseau, Frederick Fennell, Cecil Leeson, who was a friend of mine, and Larry Teal, who I had known when we played with the Detroit Symphony. Those were very interesting times because the Saxophone was just beginning to emerge and I think fundamentally out of Rascher's thrusting of the Altissimo register. The development of a new repertoire emerged from this, as did the concentration on the different members of the Saxophone family, besides just the Alto. I was just delighted to be part of all of this!

Young: How has your love for Poetry and Painting influenced your music?

Benson: I written poetry since I was four or five years old. I'm not a poet though and I don't expect my poetry to be taken seriously. I write it for fun and I enjoy making intricate little structures in my own naive way. I think poetry is one of the most concise expressive forms that we have. It doesn't take a lot of words in a short poem to grab a lot of impact. Words speak clearly and strongly and the juxtaposition of words is a very extraordinary thing, because you can drastically change the meaning of one word by putting another word next to it. I think this sensitizes me to kinds of expression and meaning.

Part of my interest has been the fact that when writing songs, you're already dealing with a completed work of art. I am interested in how its structural premises might influence my musical premises. I am very concerned about the inflection of lines in my music. I have always been interested in singing also. Singing is the fundamental musical expression.

As far as painting is concerned, I just learned about the way things look and how to see them from forty two years of lessons my wife, who is a professional painter. She is fundamentally involved in the visual world and has studied to gain this type of insight. As a result, you learn to be more observant and more comprehensively observant than you would normally be, even when looking at something for the very first time. I feel that making decisions about the quality of music requires this insight also. Sometimes this observation can lead one to discover new things about pieces which we often take for granted.

As far as the visual world is concerned, I am also a compulsive reader. I read constantly on almost any subject.

Young: Since your address to the World Saxophone Congress in 1970, what changes have you noticed in the Saxophone world?

Benson: The Saxophone Congress has had a significant impact in the field showing that you can get a lot of good new music. It has also brought international literature to American players which would probably not happen as easily otherwise. People can also read in professional journals about things that their teachers might never discuss with them, or read about literature that they might not know. The instruments are also undoubtedly better. I think that the interpretative potential is greater as a result of all of this.

Young: Saxophonists have long tried to gain increased acceptance in the traditional world of classical music. Do you have any feelings about how this should continue to happen?

Benson: It's the composers that you have to especially be concerned about. We're past the point where we need to try and get composers' pieces published. We're past the point where we need to guarantee performances for composers. I think Saxophonists should think about who is an important, interesting, and serious composer that hasn't written for the Saxophone yet. Contact that person about what it would take to get a piece from them. It might not even take much money, but rather an attractive performance environment, for example in Tully Hall or Town Hall in New York. You won't get better pieces by simply pleading with composers to include the Saxophone.

Also, how many musicologists or theorists have ever really taken Saxophone music seriously? Why don't we get them to appear at Saxophone Congress meetings to talk about Saxophone music? The Saxophonists are already involved, so you have to try and get these musicologists, composers and theorists involved. If you can't get these people to advocate the instrument, then the general musically-educated public isn't going to take the instrument seriously either. The flute, bassoon, clarinet, horn, and trumpet are all written about by musicologists and theorists. If you want the stature of the Saxophone to increase, you have to get the musicologists and theorists to identify and evaluate what you've done over the last 35-40 years and talk about it and

advocate it. Even if you have to pay their way to a Saxophone Congress, it's worth it in the long run.

Young: On behalf of all Saxophonists, Thanks so much for sharing your music and insights with us over the past 40 years.

Benson: Thank you