UC Riverside
Diagonal: An Ibero-American Music Review

Title
Samper, Baltasar. "Música de Jazz. Conferències de 1935." Antoni Pizà and Francesc Vicens, editors. Palma de Mallorca, Spain: Lleonard Muntaner, 2019

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9031p74m

Journal
Diagonal: An Ibero-American Music Review, 5(2)

Author
Albo, F. Javier

Publication Date
2020

DOI
10.5070/D85249500

Copyright Information
Copyright 2020 by the author(s).This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

DIAGONAL
an ibero-american music review

ISSN 2470-4199
VOL. 5 NO. 2 2020

Review

Samper, Baltasar. ***Música de Jazz. Conferències de 1935***. Antoni Pizà and Francesc Vicens, editors. Palma de Mallorca, Spain: Lleonard Muntaner, 2019.

F. JAVIER ALBO
Georgia State University, Atlanta

In recent years, historical musicology in Spain has experienced a dynamic transformation. Topics and objectives that had customarily been neglected, some of them on the basis of perceived indifference, are being moved forward thanks to the enthusiasm of musicologists, educators, composers, and performers. One of those topics is jazz, particularly early jazz. The reason for this neglect probably lies in its perceived remoteness and the assumption that the presence of jazz music on the Spanish stage was minimal and thus powerless to elicit interest among readers. This belief is ostensibly being challenged by the efforts of certain scholars who know and love jazz. Musicologists Antoni Pizà and Francesc Vicens have unearthed and edited an exciting historiographical document, perhaps the first of its kind in Spain: two lectures on jazz that the Balearic composer, pianist, and musicologist Baltasar Samper (Palma de Mallorca, 1888—Mexico City, 1966) delivered in his native language, Catalan, in Barcelona in 1935. Samper gave the lectures at the request of two important cultural institutions in the city, the *Ateneu Polytechnicum* and *Discòfils, Associació Pro-Música*. The first lecture was divided into two sessions, which Samper presented on two consecutive Tuesdays in May, whereas the second lecture took place in December of the same year. The story of the whereabouts of the manuscripts of the lectures is rather eventful: Samper had left them, along with other papers, writings, and scores, in Spain, before his hasty escape to France and subsequent long exile in Mexico. The lectures had been salvaged by Roser Samper, the composer's daughter from his first marriage, and ended up in the possession of the Majorcan pianist Joan Moll, another champion of Samper's music, who encouraged Pizà and Vicens to transcribe and publish them.

In addition to the transcription of the lectures, the book includes two appendices: the first is a reprint of the written version of the first lecture, abridged and translated into Spanish, which appeared as an article in three consecutive issues of the short-lived publication *Jazz Magazine* (August, September-October, and December of 1935). The second appendix is an article by Samper on Maurice Ravel, hitherto unpublished. The book also includes an index, a bibliography, and an index of names.

Pizà and Vicens, who, like Samper, come from the Balearic Islands, may have seemed a natural choice for the assignment. Of course, that circumstance could not serve as the sole justification. Pizà, is a multi-disciplinary scholar whose extensive curriculum, including research on a great variety of subjects, supports the publisher's editorial choice. Having spent most of his professional life in New York (he is the founder and director of the Foundation for Iberian Music, headquartered in the Graduate Center of the City University of New York), Pizà has been exposed to all kinds of American music since early in his career, including jazz, and possesses a level of proficiency on the subject that

exceeds that of most of his fellow colleagues in Spain. Vicens's versatility and expertise as a musicologist are backed by the wide array of topics he has researched, which include, among other things, twentieth-century folk music and popular genres such as rock and roll, and also jazz.

The editors' scholarly resourcefulness is evidenced by their nuanced vision and the rich historical contextualization they have applied to the interpretation of the work of Samper. Their multi-layered and heterogeneous analysis adds substance to Samper's lectures, puts them in perspective, and unfolds their real significance and modern-day prevalence. Since the manuscripts of the lectures were the editors' single primary source, I can speculate that the task of finding complementary information must have been painstakingly challenging. One example: Samper, gramophone at hand, illustrated his lectures with musical examples; yet, in his notes, he often omitted names of performers, titles of works and other details. To the reader's benefit, the book is furnished with copious explicative footnotes that fill those and other gaps (unfortunately, the editors have not always been successful in their thorough search for data and some details remain unidentified).

Baltasar Samper was a multifaceted musician. He was a composer of symphonic works (notably the orchestral suite *Cançons i danses de Mallorca* premiered in 1929), small-scale pieces and, later in his life, film music; a pianist, and a musicologist. After moving from Mallorca to Barcelona, he studied with the best teachers available at the time, Felip Pedrell (composition) and Enric Granados (piano). Samper soon became a member of the *Compositors Independents de Catalunya*, a group of young musicians motivated by the nationalistically driven *Noucentisme*, the artistic movement of the early twentieth century that gave momentum to the renewal of Catalan art. These composers included, besides Samper, Robert Gerhard, Jaume Pahissa, Frederic Mompou, Blanca Selva, Manel Blancafort, and Eduardo Toldrà. Coinciding with the political and social progress of Catalan nationalism at the time, Samper accepted, at the request of the Office of the *Obra del Cançoner Popular de Catlaunya* (an institution created in 1922 with the purpose of promoting the popular music of Catalonia and the rest of Catalan-speaking regions of Spain) the task of documenting and cataloguing the popular songs of the Balearic Islands. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Samper and his collaborator Dolors Porta (who later became Samper's second wife) crisscrossed the islands of Majorca, Minorca, and Ibiza, compiling, recording, transcribing and cataloguing the songs they heard performed—not unlike what Béla Bartok was doing around the same time in the Balkans. The results of that assignment can be counted as Samper's greatest accomplishment as a musicologist.
Samper remained in Barcelona throughout the Spanish Civil War, frantically fleeing to France the day before Franco's troops entered the city, on 26 January 1939. In 1942, in the midst of the country's occupation by the Nazis, he sailed to Mexico, settling in Mexico City, where he made a living teaching and composing music for films, occasionally returning to Spain for short visits. Many of Samper's compositions remain unpublished and have never been performed (or were performed sporadically during his lifetime). In 2018, his papers were acquired by the *Arxiu del Regne de Mallorca* (Archive of the Kingdom of Majorca) and are currently in the process of being catalogued. Hopefully, his works will start to be performed in public.

Scholarly writings on Samper are scarce. A couple of recently published articles and an interesting documentary by the *Televisiò de les Illes Balears* (the Balearic Islands' public television channel) indicate that there is a growing interest in saving his music from oblivion. In view of the neglect that Samper's accomplishments have endured (like so many of his contemporaries), his life

in exile and truncated career illustrate, in retrospect, the affront to culture (not to mention humanity) that Franco's long dictatorship was.

The most informative part of the book is the meticulously and carefully crafted twenty-five-page preface. Its title, "L'Estigma allarmant del cabaret" ("The Alarming Stigma of the Cabaret") is fitting. It identifies the main issue that Samper vehemently addressed in his lectures: the distinction between authentic jazz (in his words, "genuine") and the "pseudo-jazz" (again, his words) that was compromising both its reputation and its just appreciation. In my opinion, the preface pursues two objectives. One, the acknowledgment of the historical value of Samper's lectures and writings and the impact they had in his contemporaries. Two, the recognition of the artistic vibrancy of Barcelona at a time when the city's cultural offerings and cosmopolitanism matched that of other European capitals—including, if not surpassing, Madrid, the capital of Spain, a city from which Barcelona sought to distinguish itself at the time, politically and culturally.

With the city of Barcelona in the background, the editors interpret Samper's lectures in the context of the eventful and tumultuous year of 1935—the last before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War that ushered in the fascist regime of General Francisco Franco in 1939. This approach enhances the significance of Samper's thoughts, rendering them especially relevant to the modern reader. I daresay that, without the preface, the lectures might have lacked the substance that would ultimately justify their publication. As for the appendix containing Samper's essay on Ravel, discovered among Moll's papers and written in the same didactic and informal vein as the lectures on jazz, it is noteworthy and adds some pages to an otherwise short volume. Yet the decision of including it in the book feels, in my opinion, somewhat arbitrary, especially because it is unrelated to the previous chapters—notwithstanding, of course, Ravel's interest in jazz.

Indeed, Barcelona plays a fundamental supporting role in the story. During the Republic, cultural activity in the city was as diverse as it was inclusive. The dynamism and diversity of the city's musical offerings—in which the frivolous "cuplé sicalíptico" of the cabarets coexisted peacefully with concerts at the *Palau de la Música Catalana*, opera at the *Liceu*, public performances of avant-garde music, and the activities of the ubiquitous choral societies (professional and amateur)—reveals a preoccupation with establishing a national identity at a time when the secession of Catalonia from Spain seemed plausible. In the words of Pizà and Vicens, "Barcelona appeared at the time as a modern and accepting metropolis, fascinated by the latest fashionable dances, cocktails, the *garçonne* and the flappers, and, at the same time, preoccupied for constructing a national identity" (p. 9). I was surprised to learn that jazz was not only thriving in Barcelona but also in several other smaller cities throughout the region. Jazz records sold well, young people danced to live jazz music in clubs like the *Hot Club de Barcelona* and attended festivals in which Django Reinhardt and the *Quintette du Hot Club France* performed. Surely and sadly, that frantic activity would not last: the war and Franco's victory put an abrupt and violent end to Barcelona's dazzling musical life, and all cultural activity that did not adhere to the fascist model was terminated overnight.

The purpose of Samper's lectures was eminently didactic. Knowing that he was speaking to a musically untrained audience, he carefully avoided the use of any musical terminology that his listeners could have found confusing or too academic. Not unlike a modern introductory course on jazz fundamentals (a "music appreciation" class on jazz), the lectures covered a comprehensive array of topics: introduction, definitions, musical characteristics (including swing and improvisation),

performance practices, historical origins (Samper claimed that jazz originated in New Orleans in 1903), early developments, and influences (he mentioned the blues, "working rhyming songs" and negro spirituals, leaving out, among other things, minstrel and vaudeville songs, and, to my surprise, barely mentioning ragtime). His explanation of swing, surely a slippery and elusive notion for a non-musically educated audience, comparing it to the rubato of Chopin's music, was particularly imaginative, as was his description of the distinctive way jazz musicians performed on traditional instruments in both the "rhythmic" and the "melodic" sections. In addition, Samper acknowledged early performers like Louis Armstrong ("the greatest jazz artist"), Jelly Roll Morton, Bix Beiderbecke (Samper noted that he was white), King Oliver, and Duke Ellington, among others.

By his own admission, Samper was not an expert on jazz, although his lectures attest that he was more than knowledgeable. In any case, his profound admiration for the novel and original type of music that had recently arrived (via France) in Barcelona, and the perspective of speaking in front of a curious and appreciative audience, was all the encouragement he needed. Rather than trying to gain adepts, Samper spoke to those who were intrigued by "this most peculiar manifestation of the music of our time," with the purpose of dispelling some misconceived practices that had damaged its reputation, the result, he claimed, of the listeners' exposure to substandard imitations of "genuine jazz"—in his words, the nefarious "false jazz" that misrepresented the genre and deceived the pubic. Samper's list of proscribed genres and sub-genres that had developed "at the expense of distorting jazz music and usurping its name" included cabaret music, "music hall," variety shows, *cuplés*, tango, operetta and "film operettas" (he probably meant filmed musical theater; pp. 17–18).

Like other musicians at the time, both in Europe and in the United States, Samper was aware that jazz was in crisis, threatened by reckless commercialization and overexposure (from Hollywood films and the crooners to some of the washed-down performers and orchestras of the big band and the swing era). Misconceived stereotypes were damaging its reputation, for which it was important to remove the "stigma of the cabaret," the frivolity and approachability of the "pseudo-jazz" he detested and that stemmed from the lack of innate talent and craftsmanship by some performers who wanted to achieve a swift commercial success. To that end, Samper returned relentlessly throughout his lectures to the explanation of the differences between "hot jazz" (the genuine type) and "straight jazz" (or false jazz, that is, the style that eschewed syncopation and improvisation and favored instead a friendlier, less committed and more commercial style). To Samper, only "hot jazz" had managed to maintain its essential character from the beginning and was therefore the only type that could rightfully be referred as jazz (p. 44).

Still young in the 1930s, jazz was by then no longer a novelty in Europe: it was universally identified as America's most important type of autochthonous music. In Spain, its appeal was widespread, especially among the educated upper and middle classes. In jazz converged the serious and the amusing, the popular and the eccentric, the innocent and the sophisticate—words that we associate with the Western world in the years following the First World War. By the 1930s, avant-garde composers like Ravel or Stravinsky (not to mention American composers) had successfully incorporated some elements of jazz into their compositions, effectively sanctioning it as a valued type of music according to "classical" standards—integrating it in the canon, as it were. Yet there was one form of legitimization that still eluded jazz: its scholarly reputation, which could only be achieved by the endorsement of the academic world. In this regard, Samper (though not a scholar in the strict sense of the term) engaged in the debate. At the same time, his fresh, non-judgemental

approach and genuine love for jazz music (reinforced by his previous ethnomusicological research in Mallorca) prevented him from engaging in an argument over the position of jazz in an imaginary musical hierarchy where it would have to stand side by side with other genres of supposedly higher rank. Because of this, Samper's lectures are historically relevant: in retrospect, they constituted one of the first (if not the first) attempts by a Spanish composer to articulate the language and the value of jazz from a musicological point of view. With his insistence on the distinction between real and false jazz, Samper contributed to the de-stigmatization of a marginal musical manifestation and to its acceptance in the academic world, clearing the rarified air brought by the philistines who had succumbed to false fetishism and to the influence of the cabaret. If we take into an account that the perceived banalization of jazz was at the time a concern to many supporters of the genre, including Samper, the fact that he felt impelled to participate in the debate ultimately makes his contribution historically significant and further supports and justifies the publication of his lectures.

Samper's understanding of what for him constituted "the real" and "the genuine" in jazz forces the modern-day reader, almost inevitably, to consider another aspect. As a white European speaking in the 1930s, his account of the origins of jazz needs to be judged from his chronological perspective—or else it might sound rather pedestrian and naive. It is important to keep in mind that Samper was speaking to an uninformed (if appreciative) audience. Some of the stereotypes he used are illustrative: the artistic gift of the black musician was instinctive, his musical feeling mysterious. He explained that "Once upon a time there was a country where blacks, in chains, worked as slaves, subjugated by evil shipowners" (p. 39). His essentialist assessment of the "black soul" and the "musical instinct of the black race" is revealed, for example, in these words: "It has been demonstrated that the musical instinct of the black race possesses an extraordinary finesse, especially regarding rhythmic inventiveness… [it is] the result of an exceptional gift. In their performances, blacks attain a nuanced array of feelings imponderable to musicians of other races" (p. 39). Later on, however, Samper addressed the issue of white appropriation of black culture, giving credit to the white musicians who had managed to successfully imitate the musical traits of "black musicians" in a country where racism was still rampant, at the risk of having to confront individuals of their own race (pp. 56–57). Ultimately, the good white performers of jazz (that is, those who had learned to imitate their black counterparts) had contributed to the advancement of the genre through their knowledge of theory and polished technique, the result of having been trained in music schools and conservatories: "The whites, better prepared musically, added nuances to the black style. […] Blacks, thanks to their fine instinct and wonderful accuracy, absorbed and even developed them. Thus—and this is very important—[musical] form was developed and improved, while maintaining the style. Inspired by them, black musicians started to play with more care and refinement." (p. 56). Thanks to the white musicians' influence, the "musical worth" of jazz had increased, especially among orchestras that lacked skilled improvisers. Conversely, a complete reliance on technical competence could be problematic: excessive emphasis on sophisticated and elaborate arrangements, characteristic of the style of some big bands, or, in his words, "symphonic jazz" (Samper deemed the term "stupid"), could, once again, be detrimental to the preservation of the genuine essence of jazz. Duke Ellington, whose orchestra "has recently become so famous" was an example of that: although he admitted and approved that Ellington encouraged solo improvisation among the members of his orchestra, Samper feared the musician could be "walking into thin ice, and it would regrettable that his emphasis on composing and excessive sophistication" might eventually lead to "dangerous results." (pp. 56–57).

Considering that all these issues generated a debate within jazz circles at the time, in the United States and elsewhere, Samper's lectures constitute an important historiographical record, especially in Spain, where documents on early jazz are scarce. There is more: Samper's alarming call for the survival of "genuine jazz" may resonate in modern ears. I am writing this in Atlanta in 2020, a city where rap music thrives and where there is an intense debate about the effects of excessive commercialism, which some fear as the cause of the potential future disintegration of "real" rap music. If debates concerning issues of "authenticity" (and lack thereof) are as current now as they were in 1935, and as long as they continue to elicit anxiety and boost creativity, then Samper's words still resonate eighty-five years after they were uttered. The publication of this book exemplifies the efforts by musicologists like Pizà and Vicens (among others) in leading the way towards a more nuanced interpretation and understanding of Spain's musical past. It is a step in the right direction.

Albo, F. Javier. "Review: Samper, Baltasar. *Música de Jazz. Conferències de 1935*. Antoni Pizà and Francesc Vicens, editors. Palma de Mallorca, Spain: Lleonard Muntaner, 2019." *Diagonal: An Ibero-American Music Review* 5, no. 2 (2020): 114–119.