



**Steve Lacy and Mal
Waldron, July 28
2002, Brussels –
Before the Steve
Lacy and Joëlle
Léandre concert at
the Belga Café
(© Rita De Vuyst)**

Handwritten musical score for Steve Lacy by Joëlle Léandre. The score is written on five staves. The top staff is in 2/4 time, with a tempo marking of 2/4. The second staff is in 1/8 time, with a tempo marking of 1/8. The third staff is in 3/4 time, with a tempo marking of 3/4. The fourth and fifth staves are in 3/4 time, with a tempo marking of 3/4. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings (pp, mp, pppp). There are also some handwritten annotations and symbols, including a large 'X' on the left side and a '10'' marking on the right side. The bottom of the page has some handwritten text: 'For Steve', 'Milly Léal', and 'Joëlle'.

Sheet music for
Steve Lacy by
Joëlle Léandre

Lacy: unlimited but not boundless

Fernand Tanghe

Steve Lacy was born in New York on July 23 1934, in an America that swung between the obvious, hopeless misery of a crisis never seen before and the quiet hope for a New Deal. His real name sounds weightier: Steven Norman Lackritz. Lacy is of Russian origin – in this regard this situates him in the annals of jazz next to illustrious figures of the same kind. People like Stan Getz and Bill Evans, and of course Gershwin who was not a full-blooded jazz figure but still had an enormous influence on the repertoire of jazz soloists. As often, the Jewish-Russian roots have become unrecognizable in the Americanized name. Nothing makes us suspect that Getz is derived from Gayetski. In Lacy's case, the more Anglo-Saxon name was not created in the family circle. It was Rex Stewart, one of the jazz greats who young Lacy performed his first concerts with, who changed Lackritz – which he found an unruly and unmelodious name – into Lacy.

Lacy did indeed make his musical debut in the circle of classic jazzmen and even veterans, after having indirectly expressed a first phase in this love for jazz: not through sounds but through images (he took photographs of famous soloists and sold them at the entrance of concert halls). But one thing led to the next. Lacy soon took up clarinet lessons with Cecil Scott, a rather eccentric reed blower from the high days of traditional jazz, followed by soprano sax. In the early fifties he made his mark on both instruments with figureheads of New Orleans, Dixieland and Kansas City jazz: Pops Foster, Zutty Singleton, Willie The Lion Smith, Henry Red Allen, Pee Wee Russell, Max Kaminsky, Buck Clayton, Dickie Wells, Hot Lips Page; Rex Stewart, and many more. Yet Lacy's unpredictability soon started showing: he met Cecil Taylor and participated in his experimental searches for five years. Lacy exchanged tradition for the avant-garde in a short period of time. From one extreme to the next? That diagnosis would be too simple. The fact that he can pick up the most varied styles and identify with all of them does not mean that he is a chameleon. It is more an indication of an anti-dogmatic mentality, of a music making style that is adverse to fixed codes and shows real, inherent openness. It soon became apparent that the unpredictable would remain the thread throughout his career (if this saying is at all possible here): after years of exploring the free jazz waters and every detail of the experimental territory he would still occasionally re-contact traditional jazz players and record with Bobby Hackett and Kenny Davern (1964 resp. 1978). This indicates that he felt just as at home with them as in his debut years. Moreover, parallel to the cooperation with Taylor, he remained active in combos that played jazz, which was a combination of Dixieland and swing (led by himself or with trumpet player Dick Sutton).

Simultaneously, Lacy's music studies took a more systematic course (courses at the Schillinger School in Boston and the Manhattan School of Music) and his instrument arsenal broadened: other members of the saxophone family and the flute. But not for long: after a while Lacy started a "love affair with the soprano sax". Whoever wants to take this demanding and jealous mistress seriously, must limit himself to an exclusive relationship. The soprano sax is after all a treacherous instrument: extremely difficult to master, as if it is naturally out of tune. During the period of classic jazz it was only used sporadically. As arrangement and combined play grew more complex it almost completely disappeared from the scene.

Before Lacy, Sidney Bechet was the only musician to use the soprano sax as his main instrument (but not exclusively: he always continued playing the clarinet); Johnny Hodges had also successfully played it once in a while in Ellington's orchestra, but after some time he stopped for good. Until the fifties, Bechet was of course associated with soprano sax in jazz music and thanks to him Lacy 'fell in love with it', yet he did not use Bechet's technical or stylistic approach as a model. On the soprano, Bechet had developed an inimitable style and particularly a unique timbre, instantly recognizable with its widely spread out vibrato. Admired by devoted fans and a source of irritation to others, Lacy considered this constant resort to a distinct vibrato a trick to get round the instrument's intonation problems: this way Bechet could smooth over its intrinsic 'falseness'. Lacy would on the other hand not reconcile himself: he would tame this 'devilish' instrument, even correct every note if necessary; but he did realize this would require extreme continuous effort and ascetic discipline, and that he would get very frustrated along the way; the effort it took was incompatible with playing other instruments. In this search Lacy would not only explore the known weaknesses but also the unexpected possibilities of the soprano sax. He did not only learn to control and adjust the official register; he also developed new ground, added several dozen notes and developed the register to unprecedented heights, mainly by devising and testing several maneuvers. But even more important than this exploration of this instrument's bottom to ceiling was that he greatly extended the instrument's expressive possibilities.

Sidney Bechet

Back to Lacy's debut years. On the earliest records we have of him he is the sideman: sometimes from a traditional player like Sutton (1954), other times he plays beside Cecil Taylor ('55-57; he also toured with him at the 1957 Newport festival). From then on his records appeared under his own name: on the Soprano Sax album, which is still rather classic thematically (standards), he is accompanied by Winton Kelly on the piano, Buell Neidlinger on bass and Dennis Charles on drums; Reflections (1958) is the first of a long line of recording sessions devoted to Thelonious Monk: with on the piano a more like-minded soul Mal Waldron (who regularly returned on later recordings), while Elvin Jones took care of percussion. Finally, on The Straight Horn of Steve Lacy (1960) there is a quartet without piano: soprano and baritone sax, bass + drums (Roy Haynes): one can hear a hesitant transition between bebop and New Thing, as the choice of themes also indicates (written by Parker, Monk and Taylor). During these years Lacy also participates in various albums led by arranger Gil Evans: Gil Evans & Ten (1957), Great Jazz Standards ('59), Quiet Nights ('62, with Miles Davis as soloist), Gil Evans Orchestra, feat. Kenny Burrell & Phil Woods ('63), The individualism of Gil Evans ('64) (Lacy and Evans would also cooperate throughout their lives: in resp. 1978, '81 and '87 Lacy played in his orchestra on the Parabola, Lunar Eclipse and Collaboration albums – with vocalist Helen Merrill in the starring role – and, also in '87, a duo-album was made, titled Paris Blues).

After his first albums under his own name, Lacy was part of Thelonious Monk's quintet in 1960 for a few months. He now more clearly evolved in the direction of experimental jazz, joined the combo who Jimmy Giuffre performed with in the Five Spot, performed with

Ornette Coleman and took part in sessions that anticipated the Free Jazz album. The results of all this can be heard on his own Evidence album from 1961 (again a quartet without piano, but this time with two free jazz figureheads: Don Cherry on trumpet and Billy Higgins on drums). At the same time, Lacy's passion for Monk's music was formed: He set up a quartet, with Roswell Rudd on the trombone, which for a long time only devoted itself to the exploration of his compositions. Meanwhile, in 1963, he took part in the recordings of a tenet set up by Monk. One reason for Lacy's continuous affinity with the Monk repertoire is that he searched for the kind of music that is suited to the soprano sax. In this respect, neither the known 'standards' nor the traditional or bebop themes could completely please him. For example, for a while he was busy transposing Anton Webern's vocal music to soprano, until he discovered that Monk's themes answered to the tessiture and possibilities of his sax and simultaneously offered the material to overcome many technical problems. This was especially crucial and it also played an important part in the cooperation with Monk – as with Taylor before. Their music was a constant challenge to Lacy: no synonym of comfort but a constant stimulant to explore ones own boundaries. Afterwards Lacy would explain that this cooperation at the time was beyond his power, which meant a permanent stress situation; but that was exactly the kind of challenge he was looking for.

Between '63 and '66 Lacy continued to work with avant-garde musicians, among others: Paul Bley, Steve Swallow, Mike Mantler, and he cooperated on recordings of Carla Bley and the Jazz Composer's Orchestra. Meanwhile he stayed in Europe for increasingly longer periods: Sweden, but especially Italy, where he engaged himself beside musicians like Giorgio Gaslini and Enrico Rava. The latter was also part of the quartet that Lacy toured Argentina in '66 with. It was meant to be a short tour but the project turned into a forced nine-month stay. Lacy, who had referred to his quartet as a 'Revolution in jazz', was unfortunate to land in Buenos Aires in the middle of a military putsch. It was the wrong music at the wrong time and place – all the more because they had not intended to 'free jazz', but also as Lacy himself puts it: 'hermetically free'. After having survived the Argentine adventure, he returned to New York for a while, where he again started recording with the Jazz Composer's Orchestra as well as recording several albums with vibraphone player Gary Burton. However he soon returned to Europe. He stayed in Rome from '68 to '70. He sometimes performed there and recorded with (among others) the aforementioned musicians, but also commenced continuous musical cooperation with singer Irene Aebi, who is also his life companion. However he soon became frustrated by the undersized offer of all-round jazz talent in Italy. This time he moved to Paris, which has been his home base for 25 years now (in the mid-nineties he left and 'emigrated' to Berlin, but his desire to live in Paris returned in '97).

During the seventies he found a formula that has determined his group efforts: a sextet where the ranks have been renewed over the years, but is supported by several loyal pillars; mainly Steve Potts on alto and soprano sax, temperamentally very different to Lacy yet still his musical complement, Bobby Few on the piano, Jean-Jacques Avenel on the double-bass (he was also a member of, among others, accordionist Richard Galliano's group from 1991 tot '93), and Irene Aebi, who sang poetic and literary texts that Lacy had put on music (by Blaise Cendrars, Apollinaire, Eluard, Char, Beckett, Braque and others) and also played the violin and cello parts.

Parallel to the activities of his own group, Lacy increased the amount of meetings, experiments and recordings with other musicians (among others): Mal Waldron, Misha Mengelberg, Eric Watson and Ran Blake (piano), Derek Bailey (guitar), Maarten Altena (bass), Evan Parker (soprano sax).

He also repeatedly performed with Japanese jazz musicians, on the occasion of regular tours in Japan. In due time he started to have a real preference for two demanding and also rather ascetic formulas: performing and recording in duo (with the aforementioned players) and as an unaccompanied soloist. Until very late in the history of jazz unaccompanied solo recordings (except for pianists) were almost unconceivable. In 1948 Coleman Hawkins was the first to dare to take the step: his 'Picasso', a solo of about 3 minutes (one side of a 78 record) was then considered revolutionary and was not followed for a long time. When the free age came this was of course less exceptional but because of his numerous solo albums, Lacy remains unique in this 'genre'. He turned the unaccompanied solo into a full formula: it perfectly answers the challenge to explore the limits of the soprano sax, while the listener never experiences the absence of a rhythm section as a flaw. In between Lacy also experimented with a more extensive strength (more or less big band-sized), but the results give quite a hesitant impression and are less convincing. Throughout the years he has also explored other musical worlds: Monk remains a passion, often honored on record, but there is also the exploration of Ellington's and Billy Strayhorn's oeuvre (*Sempre Amore*, 1986, with Waldron), as well as that of Herbie Nichols and Charles Mingus (*Spirit of Mingus*, 1991, a beautiful CD in duo with Eric Watson). Apart from that, his own compositions have increased in importance and amount. In this regard it should be noted that Lacy identified with free jazz for a rather short time: "as a revolutionary innovation it was unmistakably important", he says, but by throwing all musical structure overboard it soon became monotonous and sterile; people thought they were completely free but after a while it all started to sound the same, night after night. Sometimes radical steps are necessary to save the spirit and inventiveness of music; but what is more important is what you do after this revolution. Soon people started to realize that the discoveries should be exploited more methodically and controlled. "Freedom is not the same as playing just anything, real freedom is what you get by laying open boundaries", according to Lacy.

“Lacy and Aebi –Made in France 1970-2000”

During the seventies he moved over to what he calls 'poly-free' music, a combination of well-considered compository forms with free improvisation, a mix of the prepared and the spontaneous, on the understanding that there does not have to be a strict division, both can melt into each other. “Improvisation is not an end”, Lacy states, “but a tool. Some thoughts can only be expressed through composition, others lend themselves more for improvisation; but once composed, the prepared can be performed in a spontaneous way and always sound different and improvised” (Down Beat, 2-1997).

This way of 'post-free' music making tended back to a more coherent development and a clear logic; 'Discarded' elements – melody, harmony, rhythm, form – were reintegrated but had undergone rejuvenation, they got a more refreshing style and were open to a variety of possibilities; they were no longer used 'defensively', but were now serving as a way of finding more freedom and creativity, of both independence and mutual involvement of the musicians.

Finally the vocal element would also take an increasingly eminent place in Lacy's music (partly due to the influence of Irene Aebi). This became evident through the use of instrumental voice sounds, adding verbal-melodic or rhythmic cells in the composition but especially through putting literary and poetic texts onto music ('lit-jazz' Lacy calls it). In certain recordings the music is completely centered on the voice. This is no coincidental evolution, there are several reasons. First it means a return to the vocal essence and the roots of jazz. Moreover: have we not always expected instrumental jazz soloists to be good storytellers? That their sound, style and inflection tells a unique story, as if the instrument's language always tended towards the word and verbal communication? (Of course the latter does not apply to Lacy: communication in the crude, utilitarian sense of the word; if music expresses something then it is only itself and the player is an actor and vehicle involved in 'his' music, he does not own it, rather the opposite). In any case, real jazz musicians aspire to use their instrument as a voice, they try to create a kind of immediate bond between the conception and expression of a musical idea that is so typical of the human voice: whatever their instrument, they are singers. In some cases this takes on even more tangible forms: people like Lester Young or Dexter Gordon based their improvisations on the texts of the themes used.

That is also Lacy's intention: playing with words of a text. Every text, be it poetry or even aphorisms or speculative texts, contain an inherent 'melodicity', suggesting a characteristic melody; it can always be transposed to a musical form because it tends towards it automatically. Therefore it is also important as a composer and improviser to work with high quality, metaphorical, 'inspiring' texts. In this context Lacy stated the following about his cooperation with poet Brion Gysin: “Si on élève le niveau des lyrics, on a la possibilité de jouer sur un matériau de meilleure qualité – car nous jouons avec et sur ces mots. Quand nous jouons ces airs construits à partir des mots de Brion, on peut dire que toute la musique vient de ces mots. Pour moi, ça a été un miracle de trouver un matériel d'une telle qualité” (Jazz Magazine 1-1993).

Gysin did not only write texts for Aebi. On some recordings the cooperation with Lacy led to a direct mixture of art forms, e.g. on the Songs album (1981) where Gysin recites from his own work. Lacy does not want it to end there: he believes in a deeper unity between all art forms. As a result of live performances, his interest in hybridization of art forms has become quite an ambition: the result is not limited to a combination of jazz and poetry but becomes a 'Gesamt' spectacle where music, dance, choreography, drama, film, painting and sculpture become profoundly intertwined. Apparently, Lacy has also been working on an opera for some time now.

This is all very important and has an unmistakably innovative dimension, but to end I would like to return to Lacy as a soloist. He has what one expects of every eminent jazz musician: an inimitable and instantly recognizable style. One important aspect of this style is something he learned from Monk: the importance of silence in music. That it is sometimes more important than the notes that are played: each note gets its value from the silence around it. (Monk); "C'est la musique qui rend le silence plus beau. C'est le silence qui rend la musique plus belle" (Lacy – Jazz Magazine 2-1995).

This attention to silence in the first place means that nothing is said when there is nothing to say: Lacy limits himself to expressing essentials, stripped of all its frills; each note gets its own intensity and is also provided with its own emotional dimension. Lacy is one of the rare people who understood, as Nietzsche put it: 'the art of ruminating'. His sense of silence also indicates an open ear for his fellow players. The fact that every note gets a special relief does not mean that it causes the melodic debit to be blocked. On the contrary: conspicuous are the long, sometimes labyrinth like lines in Lacy's improvisations. These sentences, interlarded with silence yet also drawn out, give shape to a meditative discourse: cautiously, step by step, the musical train of thought develops, deconstruction leads to reconstruction; Lacy combines the art of slow exploration with a logic that is very limpid in its conclusions; rigor, also conceptually, it feeds the power of expression and vice versa. Sometimes his music is ascetic and inward, like the meditation of a Buddhist monk, but this does not mean it is without passion or emotion (neither is it incompatible with – sometimes burlesque – humor). It sometimes appears minimalist, but it is the minimalism of abundance.

Lacy is first and foremost a unique stylist, and in that respect I would place him in line with jazz musicians who have not gathered a huge following despite their grandeur: people like Johnny Hodges, Ben Webster, Paul Desmond, even Sidney Bechet. He has created a unique, inimitable sound on the soprano sax: he has given the sax, which used to be considered a circus instrument with its irremediable approximate intonation and shaky vibrato, a definite patent of nobility. But his influence on other jazz musicians is primarily indirect; it is situated on a level of inspiration; others see him as a lesson in making high demands. Contrary to people like Coltrane he is not really a textbook example. Most jazz musicians who play soprano sax today (yet usually as additional instrument) follow Coltrane's example.

Lacy on the other hand does not really have followers, no multitude of disciples. This because he is too much a perfectionist who imperturbably goes his own way, averse to all fashionable whims, a wise and serene perfectionist.

Fernand Tanghe is a teacher at UFSIA (Universitaire
Faculteiten Sint-Ignatius Antwerpen)

Bob Kaufman

I have folded my sorrows

I have folded my sorrows into the mantle of summer night,
Assigning each brief storm its allotted space in time,
Quietly pursuing catastrophic histories buried in my eyes.
And yes, the world is not some unplayed Cosmic Game,
And the sun is still ninety-three million miles from me,
And in the imaginary forest, the shingles hippo becomes the gay unicorn.

No, my traffic is not addled keepers of yesterdays disasters,
Seekers of manifest disembowelment on shafts of yesterday's pains.
Blues come dressed like introspective echoes of a journey.
And yes, I have searched the rooms of the moon on cold summer nights.
And yes, I have refought those unfinished encounters. Still, they remain unfinished.
And yes, I have at times wished myself something different.

The tragedies are sung nightly at the funerals of the poet;
The revisited soul is wrapped in the aura of familiarity.