

The Secret Life of The Original 1949 Saxophone Concerto of Ingolf Dahl

By Paul Cohen

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The **Concerto for Alto Saxophone** by Ingolf Dahl, one of the great works in the saxophone repertoire, exists today in a revised form substantially different from the original version. From the time of its composition (1949) to its publication (1980), the concerto endured an undocumented history of revisions and performances that reflected changing attitudes of the composer and the varying abilities of the soloists. As a result of several major revisions, only some of which were publicly acknowledged by Dahl, the concerto was radically transformed into the work known today.

Composed in 1948/49 for Sigurd Rascher, the concerto was scored for full concert band with a duration of 28 minutes. The solo saxophone part, formidably difficult even within the conventional key range, extensively utilized the top-tone (altissimo) register. Despite critical acclaim for this version, including enthusiastic responses from Igor Stravinsky and Henry Cowell, Dahl first revised the work in 1953. He changed the concert band instrumentation to orchestral winds, rewrote the last movement and simplified the solo saxophone part. Among many changes, the necessity of playing within the altissimo range was eliminated. The length of this version was approximately the same as the original (1949) version (26-28 minutes).

From 1958-1959, Dahl revised the concerto for a second time. These revisions, never publicly acknowledged, consisted almost exclusively of cuts and deletions of extended sections in the second and third movements. With over seven minutes (approximately 25% of the work) deleted, the length of this last version - that which is available today - is 18-19 minutes.

Ingolf Dahl

In spirit and accomplishment, Ingolf Dahl was a musician of the rarest abilities. Highly esteemed by his colleagues, revered by his students and loved by his friends, Dahl brought to his musical activities a depth of understanding and enthusiasm that never failed to invigorate and inspire performers and audiences. The scope of his mastery of so many diverse musical skills is astonishing: he was acclaimed as a composer, conductor, piano soloist and accompanist, historian, writer and arranger, editor, administrator and educator.

Ingolf Dahl was born in Hamburg Germany on 9 June 1912 of Swedish-German parentage. His formal music education began at the Koln Hochschule fur Musik and

continued, after he fled the encroaching Nazi regime, at the Zurich Conservatory in Switzerland. Upon his emigration to Los Angeles in 1939, he immediately became immersed in the musical activities of the area, in both classical and commercial fields. In 1945 he was appointed to the faculty of the University of Southern California, a post he held until his death. Over the years, his responsibilities included conducting the University Orchestra, lecturing in the field of film and commercial music, and teaching theory, composition, orchestration, conducting, music history and literature, and leading the early music Collegium Musicum. During this time he developed close friendships with several well-known composers, including Schoenberg, Copland, and especially Stravinsky, with whom Dahl collaborated on a number of projects.

His activities as composer, conductor, performer, and lecturer began attracting national attention and recognition, resulting in numerous awards and appointments. These included two Guggenheim Fellowships, grants from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Alice Ditson Fund, and the National Endowment for the Arts; the ASCAP Stravinsky Award; two Huntington Hartford Fellowships, and many others.

Though Dahl was not a prolific composer, several of his works have become classics of American music. These include the **Allegro and Arioso** for woodwind quintet (1942), **Music for Brass Instruments** (1944), **Concerto a Tre for clarinet, violin and cello** (1947), **Concerto for Alto Saxophone** (1949), and the great **Sinfonietta for Concert Band** (1961).

Ingolf Dahl died on 7 August 1970 in Frutigen, Switzerland during one of his frequent composition sabbaticals.

A Brief History of the Concerto

Dahl first became interested in writing the **Concerto** after receiving a letter from Sigurd Rascher from March 1948. Rascher had become acquainted with Dahl's music through a performance of the **Music for Brass Instruments** and sought to interest him in a large scale work for saxophone. Intrigued by the challenge (Dahl had not yet written for large ensemble) and familiar with Rascher's reputation in Europe and the United States, Dahl accepted the invitation in June of 1948. Work on the piece progressed throughout the summer and fall of 1948, with a planned premiere with the University of Michigan, William Revelli conducting, on 14 January 1949. Progress on the work, interrupted several times by Dahl's heavy teaching and performance schedule in addition an asthmatic health condition, forced the cancellation of this performance. The actual premiere took place on 17 May 1949 with the University of Illinois Concert Band under the direction of Mark Hindsley. This original version, with a length of approx. 28 minutes, was in two movements: I. Recitative-Adagio II. Rondo.

At the time, Dahl expressed great satisfaction and enthusiasm for the work in both public and private correspondence. Writing of the dedication to Sigurd Rascher, Dahl said "As far as the saxophone concerto goes, I have the fullest confidence in it, and know that it will stand up by itself."¹

A letter to interested band directors included the following:

The style of the concerto is symphonic and it is developed on a large scale... It has been my aim to provide a big and demanding work for both players and audience, a work which would be the equivalent (in size and I hope in content) to a large-scale orchestral concerto. I believe that the bands are well-provided with the short-piece repertoire and that it is important for their musical development to have increasingly more works of greater weight and proportions.²

Dahl received support and admiration for the Concerto from composers such as Igor Stravinsky and Henry Cowell. Stravinsky in particular was impressed with the concerto. In a letter to Rascher, Dahl wrote:

You will be interested that I finally gathered my courage and took both record and score to Stravinsky and played the record to him. It was one of the greatest experiences of my life. After it was over, he said nothing but just got up and embraced me, with moist eyes, and in Russian fashion kissed me on both cheeks. He thinks it is one of the best new things he has heard. After that praise, from that great man, everything else seems to matter little, as you will understand. I will always be grateful to you for bringing this about.³

Henry Cowell also expressed enthusiasm for the work. In the same letter, Dahl wrote:

I also played the records to Henry Cowell who was here last summer. He said nothing less than that it was one of the most important and well-written band pieces he had seen and he was going to recommend it to the bandmasters' association who are meeting this month in Washington D.C.^{4 5}

Dahl began revising the concerto in the spring of 1953 in anticipation of its first

¹Letter from Dahl to Rascher 21 March 1949

²Letter from Dahl to Mr. McKerndon 15 November 1951

³Letter from Dahl to Rascher 6 March 1951

⁴Ibid.

⁵Rascher did in fact perform the concerto at the 19th annual convention of the American Bandmasters Association on 3 March 1953 in Gainesville, Florida.

performance in Los Angeles. The occasion was a specially organized homecoming concert of 11 January 1954, celebrating Dahl's return from a lengthy sabbatical. The soloist was to be William Ulyate, a well-respected woodwind player in the Los Angeles area and a personal friend of Dahl. This performance necessitated rewriting the solo part to within the conventional 2 1/2 octave key range. Many of the ossia lines were reversed, giving preference to the lower option, while contours of the solo line were reshaped to avoid the altissimo register. Dahl reduced the size of the ensemble from a symphonic band to that of a wind orchestra of thirty-six players, one player to a part. This rescoring included the elimination of the baritone horns and the entire saxophone section.

Although no sections were deleted (except for the introduction to the last movement), the last movement was substantially rewritten. The opening movement was divided into two parts played without pause. The work became a three- movement piece: I. Recitative: II. Adagio (Passacaglia) -Allegretto-Adagio: III Rondo. The duration of this version was approximately the same as the original, 26-27 minutes.

Dahl began the second revision of the concerto, one that he never publicly acknowledged, during the late fall of 1958, completing it in the spring of 1959. There was again the impetus of a performance deadline: the concerto was programed for an April, 1959, band concert at UCLA. This revision consists almost entirely of cuts and deletions, including the "Allegretto" of the second movement and some of the more lyrical sections of the "Rondo". Substantial portions of the deleted sections were included into a work that Dahl began writing in 1959. His **Serenade for Band** grew, as a result of a CBDNA commission and the inclusion of deleted material from the **Saxophone Concerto**, into the great **Sinfonietta for Concert Band** of 1961. This second revision (third version) from 1958-1959 is the version that is commercially available today. The three movements of this version, the first two of which are played without pause, are "Recitative, Adagio (Passacaglia)" and "Rondo alla Marcia". This version is approximately 18 minutes in length.

The Question of Revisions

There were many reasons why Dahl chose to radically alter a work that was so highly respected in the most important musical circles. The reasons, however, only partially concerned musical elements -- practical considerations were major factors in his decisions.

As Dahl was first composing the concerto, he realized that his expanded symphonic treatment of the wind ensemble, coupled with his virtuoso writing of the solo part, would limit performance possibilities. In fact, Dahl seemed inspired by the challenge of such a substantial undertaking. In considering the concert band, he wrote: "*Somebody* has to write the big pieces, the symphonic works, if the medium is to be elevated (higher, like [the] symphony

orchestra.")⁶ Dahl realized the limited performance possibilities in the years following completion of the concerto. He wrote, "Any one who finishes a composition of this sort will have to purge his mind of thoughts of external reward for his works".⁷ The reasons were readily apparent: concert bands at that time had no original music of the length, difficulty and symphonic scope that Dahl had conceived, and the saxophone part, especially in the use of the top-tone (altissimo) range could only be played by Sigurd Rascher at that time (1948-49). Both factors would necessarily limit performance opportunities.

Rascher did perform the concerto at least six times between 1949 and 1954 with some of the best concert bands in the country. Considering the length, difficulty and contemporary nature of the work, this was an excellent beginning. Nevertheless, Dahl became increasingly dissatisfied. The critical acclaim given the concerto plus Dahl's desire to become better known as a composer, prompted his desire for a greater personal visibility in the American musical world. For him this meant more performances of the concerto in addition to its publication. Dahl's artistic idealism gradually became tempered by his concern for practical matters. For Dahl, it was not at all contradictory to make changes in a work that would make it more accessible, viable or possible to perform. Of course, there is a degree to which change substantially compromises the integrity of a work, but Dahl apparently did not consider this to be the case at the time he made the revisions.

The change of the orchestration, reducing the ensemble from a concert band instrumentation to that of orchestral winds was a two-fold reaction to 1) the state of the art of band playing at that time and 2) his desire for more performing opportunities by providing the concerto the flexibility of fitting within an orchestral or band setting. The original instrumentation calls for 36 parts, with the expected doublings of a concert band. The revised version is written for 31 parts, with the indication that doubling is not necessary. Instruments not common to the orchestra, such as a saxophone section and baritone horns, were deleted, while other more common orchestral instruments, such as the contrabassoon, were added to the new orchestration.

There is evidence to suggest that the difficulty of the solo part, which at that time excluded all soloists except Rascher, began to concern Dahl. In a letter to Rascher, Dahl discussed the reaction of a publisher to this aspect of the concerto:

⁶Dahl's notes to an undocumented lecture.

⁷Ibid.

His main argument was that they felt it impractical to publish a piece that could only be played by one living person. For a publisher to publish what I imagine might be the only full-size important concerto for saxophone and band to date would be a better thing if he could feel that the solo part were accessible to many.⁸

The simplification of the solo part primarily involved reducing the range required of the soloist to the point where the top-tone range (altissimo) was no longer required. In the revisions, Dahl carefully re-worked and recontoured many of the lines and phrases to keep them within the conventional key limit of two and one-half octaves. Although ossia passages allowed the option of the altissimo register, the original top-tone sections for which there were no alternatives were rewritten. The entire concerto could now be played without access to the higher register. Other sections of the original version that did not extend beyond the key range (especially the **Rondo** movement) are extremely difficult to play at tempo. In the last revision, this movement was substantially rewritten; most of the more difficult passages were either removed, reworked, or consolidated into a more compact and simpler form. Although there is evidence of artistic motivation to some of these changes, the end result became a movement considerably easier to play.

The differences between the original concerto and the revised, published version are many, and in some instances are of such magnitude as to vastly affect the very nature of the piece. Comparison of the musical merits of both versions invariably leads to specious arguments of superiority of one or the other. While it is true that Dahl withdrew the original version (due, in part, to his duplicating material of the **Concerto** into the **Sinfonietta for Concert Band**), there are no clear cut indications that a composer's revisions are automatic improvements. It would be convenient to assume that later versions are preferable, but even after careful study it is difficult to decide which version is best. Musical history is replete with composers' revised efforts that sometimes enhance, other times weaken, the original inspiration and intent that spawned the creation of the work.

When listening to the revised version of the concerto in comparison to the original, it is clear that Dahl was operating from a different compositional perspective. Neither better or worse, but certainly different. This is to be expected: as the time between versions grow, the practical and artistic considerations of the composer invariably become more distant and removed from the conception of the original. Perhaps it can be said that the existence of great works in more than one version is due to the continuous metamorphosis and evolution of the composer.

⁸Letter from Dahl to Rascher, 18 July 1953

Such is the case with the **Concerto for Alto Saxophone**. Although qualitative comparison is tempting, in part because the versions are so different, it ultimately becomes a matter of personal preference. The original drew on Dahl's unfettered and untested musical imagination, giving rise to an enormously imaginative work of expanded, and in some ways, challenging proportions. But here the music soars, and unencumbered by practical limitations gives rise to a felicity, vigor, and depth rarely experienced within the saxophone or wind ensemble repertoire. The published version is a compact, fast-paced and powerful work that makes an immediate impression that is sustained throughout. The refreshing directness and pacing gives to the audience and soloist an immediate, gratifying, and exciting musical experience.⁹

As concert saxophonists and wind conductors continue to develop an awareness and appreciation of truly great music and the aesthetic and performance traditions associated with such music, interest will naturally turn to works like Dahl's **Concerto for Alto Saxophone**. The nature and viability of the original version needs to be explored with a modern performance, taking advantage of the sophistication of present day wind ensembles, conductors and soloists. The discussion, debate, and ultimate awareness and celebration of what may be a profoundly enriching musical experience (performance willing) may yet bring us closer to the artistic ideals to which we as musicians constantly aspire.

For performance inquiries, please contact
Paul Cohen
43 Van Buskirk Rd.
Teaneck, New Jersey, 07666
201-837-7884 (fax 201-837-0260)

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⁹For an expansive, in-depth discussion and technical and comparative examination of the Dahl Concerto, the reader is referred to the following dissertation published by To the Fore Publishers:

The Saxophone Concerto of Ignolf Dahl: A Historical and Comparative Analysis by Paul Cohen

