

Timothy McAllister

One of the world's most eminent classical saxophonists talks to Michael Pearce about his career and work ethic, supporting his students through the coronavirus pandemic, and being the dedicatee of John Adams' Saxophone Concerto



'We have this little saying in our class – can't stop, won't stop,' says Timothy McAllister. 'It just feels so dark at the moment, but all we can continue to do is hone our skills. This is what we trained to do – we're not interested in pivoting.'

I'm Zooming the American saxophonist on a Tuesday morning, the only weekday gap in his busy teaching schedule at the University of Michigan. Wearing large over-ear headphones he joins the call from his home teaching studio, with a soprano sax on a stand to his right and baritone in the corner behind.

I immediately comment on the clarity of his camera, leading our conversation straight to the Covid-19 pandemic. 'It's the very least I can do,' he says. 'I can't necessarily control my students' budget to have a reciprocal set-up, but I need to try and offer them a good experience. And that's hard, it's hard for all of us.'

McAllister has been professor of saxophone at the University of Michigan since 2014, succeeding his former teacher, Donald Sinta. He has a large class by most music college or university standards, responsible for teaching 23 students and coaching five saxophone quartets.

When the first round of lockdown restrictions hit the US in March, the country's entire academic community had one weekend to move

online. 'Initially, I think we were scared that it would somehow replace all in-person teaching, but I don't think anyone has yet concluded this is the right way to move things forward.'

Fast forward to autumn and the University of Michigan, like many universities and colleges in the US and Europe, is now operating a hybrid model. All teaching, including one-to-one lessons, takes place in large spaces to ensure social distancing, which means that room bookings have to be rotated between all faculties. McAllister decided to split his class in half, with each student alternating between weekly in-person and Zoom lessons.

Understandably, safety is the top priority. When teaching in person, McAllister wears both a face mask and shield, and also sets up an air purifier in the room. He doesn't take his instruments, eliminating their potential exposure to aerosols from others. Lessons last only 40 minutes, as opposed to the usual one hour, to allow for room ventilation in between students. 'It's a pretty intense experience,' he says. 'With such limited contact time, I'm encouraging all my students to treat every lesson as if it were a performance.'

His students can still work, albeit in a socially distanced way, with their dedicated studio pianist, Liz Ames, who also features on McAllister's two most recent recordings: *Notturmo* and *Westland* (the latter a CD of works for saxophone and piano by Andy Scott). 'The students haven't really missed a beat,' he explains. 'They're using this opportunity to make lots of recordings and take part in virtual projects, and many are involved in competitions that have moved online.'

There's another reason to be optimistic. Despite the uncertain future of the US arts sector there has been no drop-off in the number of applicants to join McAllister's class – unsurprising, perhaps, since the University of Michigan is a regular fixture in the league tables of America's top 10 music schools. The school's saxophone class is also regularly cited as number one – a reputation McAllister has maintained from his predecessor, Donald Sinta.

'I do worry about smaller colleges and universities, where maybe they weren't getting a huge applicant pool to begin with,

and then perhaps it wasn't a very elite pool. For some young people who were doubting whether they should be a musician, maybe this has just tipped them towards not doing it. They're going to go a totally different route in their careers and their parents will probably encourage them to do something else.'

McAllister has turned this into a rallying cry for his students: 'We need to understand that if there's anyone left standing, it needs to be us, as dark as that sounds. That is the mandate I've put on my students – you need to be the ones who people look to for future leadership, you need to be the experts, and you need to be the ones really demonstrating the highest level of skill.'

Discovering the greats

Born in 1972, McAllister grew up in a suburb of Houston, Texas, near NASA's Johnson Space Centre, where his mother worked as a software engineer. He was lucky to live in a wealthy school district, populated by the children of astronauts and aerospace engineers, which meant that schools had the money to invest in their award-winning school band programmes.

Band programmes exist throughout the US, but few states

treat it as seriously and competitively as Texas. 'It's very innovative, and there's lots of money put towards it, just as much as sports sometimes,' McAllister says.

Students usually choose an instrument in 6th or 7th Grade (equivalent to Year 7 or 8 in England and Wales) and learn through a weekly programme of sectional and whole-

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ensemble band rehearsals. In most schools participation is compulsory, at least to begin with, and free of charge – at least in theory.

'From the very beginning, what comes with these kinds of juggernaut school band programmes is essentially a mandatory need to take private lessons. If you want to excel and be in the top band, if you want to be considered for first chair, that's the only way.' Fortunately, McAllister's family could pay for lessons. His mother, a pianist and violist in her youth, always encouraged his musical studies, never pushing him down the science route she followed herself.

So why saxophone? In short – it was the heyday of fusion jazz. 'We were growing up with MTV and seeing saxophone solos in all these music videos. Wham, Spandau Ballet, Bruce Springsteen, Clarence Clemons – it was just part of the culture at the time. We saw David Sanborn every week in the band of the early David Letterman shows, and Lenny Pickett was front and centre of the Saturday Night Live Band. There was just the litany of ➡



Timothy McAllister meeting John Adams



saxophone playing that was always on television. It was just the popular appeal.'

A world away from the celebrity of fusion jazz, McAllister soon fell in love with the classic wind band repertoire he was playing at school, including the works of Holst, Vaughan Williams and Percy Grainger. At the same time, his private teacher started handing him the traditional method books and tapes of the great classical saxophone players such as Marcel Mule, Frederick Hemke, Eugene Rousseau and Donald Sinta.

'I began to discover something I didn't realise was there – this kind of underworld of classical instruction, something called 'classical music' that existed for the saxophone. Slowly but surely, I started to aspire to play these great pieces of Creston, Glazunov, Ibert, and I fell in love with saxophone music. Then I gravitated to the pieces of the orchestral canon featuring a saxophone and started to fall in love with orchestral music, listening to 'The Old Castle' from *Pictures at an Exhibition*, *Boléro*, *Symphonic Dances* and so on.

'That was my gateway and I teach this to my students to this day – fall in love with symphonic repertoire that uses your instrument and then branch out. Branch out and discover Beethoven, because as saxophone players we don't discover Beethoven. We go through this very focused lens of very niche and under-appreciated composers, and a lot of B-level composers for sure, so it's on us to reach out and expand beyond that, and then we start to discover the great classics.'

You never know who's listening, you never know the stakes of anything you're doing, you have no idea what the ripple effects of your artistry will be

McAllister's first teacher was a multi-instrumentalist who quickly recognised that his student needed to move to a saxophone specialist to fulfil his ambitions. Now in his mid-teens, McAllister began to consider a career in music and saw there was a choice to be made – take the path of the woodwind multi-instrumentalist or 'go all in' on the saxophone.

'I think I understood the career path of a classical saxophonist very early on. I knew that you had to go the conservatory route, come out the other side with probably multiple degrees, and I also understood that it could possibly lead to a life in academia. This was very appealing to me – to become a college saxophone teacher with a freelance life orbiting that. And frankly, I didn't love anything more than that at the time, so I decided to commit to that path.'

McAllister moved to a new teacher, spending three of his high-school years studying with local saxophonist Ralph Burton, a protege of Eugene Rousseau. His new teacher only took on a handful of private students who all had to audition to study with him. Now under the guidance of a saxophone specialist, McAllister started to enter competitions, making his concerto debut aged 16 performing the Glazunov Concerto with the Houston Civic Symphony.

When the time came to apply to university, he set his sights on the 'big three' American saxophone classes at the time – Rousseau at Indiana University, Hemke at Northwestern University, and Sinta at the University of Michigan. 'One way or another, all the great American players come from the teaching tree of those three players, so that was my goal.' Three decades later, it's now McAllister's class that's in the minds of aspiring students.

Meeting John Adams

Now 47, McAllister's concert biography shows he is likely exceeding his teenage ambitions to balance a performing life around a salaried college teaching post. To date, he has premiered over 150 new works and he appears on over 50 albums as soloist, chamber musician or orchestral saxophonist. He is also the soprano player of the award-winning PRISM Quartet – all former students of Donald Sinta – who have commissioned nearly 300 works for saxophone quartet from

composers across the musical spectrum.

But it is his work with the American composer John Adams that stands out, which ultimately led to a new saxophone concerto. 'You could say it was my 15-minutes of fame,' he says modestly.

In 2009, McAllister's career was just starting to take off when he received a call from the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The orchestra was looking for a saxophonist to perform a new work by Adams, jointly commissioned by a consortium of orchestras and organisations: the Los Angeles Philharmonic, London Symphony Orchestra, Toronto Symphony Orchestra and *ZaterdagMatinee* (a concert series run by Dutch public-service broadcaster, NTR).

There would be numerous premieres around the world, but it was the world premiere in LA that was the headline grabber, forming part of the programme for a run of concerts celebrating the appointment of wunderkind Venezuelan conductor, Gustavo Dudamel (a recording of the concert is available on CD and DVD).

The new piece was called *City Noir*, a 35-minute work inspired by the writings of historian Kevin Starr on the social and cultural history of urban California in the late 40s and early 50s. Adams described the work as 'jazz-influenced symphonic music', with

prominent solo parts for viola, trumpet, trombone, horn, double bass, and alto saxophone.

Defying expectations, Adams flipped the script on the role of the saxophone. 'The saxophone wasn't this kind of moody, or sex-scene background music,' McAllister says. 'He wanted to write a virtuoso display for the classical saxophone, knowing full well it would be very difficult for a non-saxophone specialist to pull off.'

The LA Phil personnel manager sent him the first two pages of the sax part a few months before the world premiere, asking if he was up for the challenge. 'My first impression was that it was the hardest orchestral saxophone writing piece I'd ever seen, apart from a concerto. But of course the answer was yes, I was never going to say no.'

Adams then started liaising with the saxophonist directly, sending him sketches and asking some questions about the altissimo range.

Following the world premiere in LA, the composer conducted the piece with each orchestra involved in the commission – Simon Haram playing the saxophone part with the London Symphony Orchestra, Arno Bornkamp with the Dutch Radio Orchestra and McAllister with the Toronto Symphony. But as more requests came in for Adams to conduct the piece, McAllister emerged as the composer's first call to play the saxophone part. 'We became this kind of package deal,' he says. 'In the last 11 years, I've performed the piece over 50 times.'

But the best was yet to come. Following a 2010 performance of *City Noir* in Miami, Adams suggested over dinner he'd like to write

McAllister a saxophone concerto. A few years passed before the composer brought up the subject again, asking if the saxophonist might be free to perform a new concerto at the Sydney Opera House in August 2013, with the composer himself conducting. Needless to say, he cleared his diary.

Similar to *City Noir*, the saxophone concerto was a joint commission, funded this time by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, St Louis Symphony, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and the

Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo Foundation. McAllister performed the concerto with each orchestra and has gone on to give 45 performances of the piece worldwide.

'This is just a prime example of what we teach our students – you never know who's

listening, you never know the stakes of anything you're doing, you have no idea what the ripple effects of your artistry will be. If you can be the most prepared person on stage you'll always be remembered. If you are the person the clarinet section hears and says, that's the person we need to hire again and again, all that hard work pays off. And when that moment comes you better be ready to check all the boxes. It needs to be satisfying on every level: intonation, articulation, rhythm, and you need to be able to blend and change your sound at will.'

While *City Noir* sought to defy preconceptions of the saxophone as just a jazz instrument, Adams' saxophone concerto does acknowledge its intrinsic role in the genre. The composer's father played alto sax in big bands in the 1930s and he cites the studio 'crossover' albums by jazz greats Charlie Parker, ➤

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Timothy McAllister on promoting the classical saxophone

'I think we're all still engaged in this missionary work. The classical saxophone has always been hanging in the wings for almost 200 years, and there's some substantial repertoire that comes just prior to the 20th century.

'If you look at the top 40 hits of the classical or symphonic canon, there are a minimum of 10 pieces that feature a saxophone. And that doesn't even account for the prolific pieces emerging from today's composers, such as Thomas Adès or John Adams.

'We have this huge cultural amnesia. We forget about names like Paul Harvey in the UK. On the global stage, the classical music world has forgotten about Sigurd Raschèr. He gave hundreds of concerts a year, played with almost every major orchestra and had over 200 saxophone works dedicated to him in his lifetime. If you go to his archive in Fredonia, New York, you can go through volumes and volumes of newspaper clippings of his concerts. He was a

celebrity in that regard, yet his name disappeared into history, except to saxophone players. To us he's a legend, whose name shows up on the top of all these pieces.

'There have been successes along the way for 100 years but we've never immediately capitalised on them. What we are now seeing is the next person in line, there's always another talented youngster in waiting, which we've seen for generations in the worlds of other instruments but it's only really developed for saxophone in the past 20 or 30 years.

'It's also interesting that the minute an artistic administration is willing to take a chance on the saxophone, I've never encountered a situation that was disappointing. It's always a risk worth taking for them because audiences just regularly say, wow, that was amazing, I loved that.'



Many players feel I've been able to usher in a new kind of aesthetic and it's led to me doing a lot more teaching in Europe. It's carved out a new sound people are interested in

Stan Getz and Cannonball Adderley in the 50s and 60s as inspiration for the piece.

From the outset, however, Adams sought a new hybrid sound from McAllister, sitting somewhere in between the classical and jazz sound worlds. Particularly, he took issue with the traditional 'French style' of classical saxophone playing of the 30s and 40s.

'This deeper, specialist classical saxophone world just seemed a little bizarre to him,' McAllister says. 'It seemed like we were a bit of a cult, pursuing something so niche that we had made ourselves irrelevant in some ways. So for me, it was about trying to channel a new sound – a large jazz sound that was still possible on a classical set-up, while trying to remove some of the cliché stereotypes of classical saxophone technique, such as a lot of spinning vibrato on certain notes.'

The composer described the result as perhaps the first statement of a new American saxophone sound. 'The Adams concerto gave me a platform to basically blow up the stereotypes of American classical playing in the 40s and 50s,' McAllister says. 'Many players feel I've been able to usher in a new kind of aesthetic and it's led to me doing a lot more teaching in Europe.'

It's carved out a new sound people are interested in, which I've applied to the pedagogy and repertoire that I teach, including some of the masterpieces of the American school.'

Play it all, love it all

McAllister's passion for pedagogy and raising the profile of the saxophone is infectious. He leads by example and it is little wonder that he's in such high demand to give masterclasses at institutions and conferences around the world. Among his regular commitments are two visits a year to the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in Manchester, where he holds the post of international visiting tutor of saxophone.

'As we look to a post-Covid society we can't just have these buzz words in academia – innovation, diversity, inclusion – and do nothing about them. It's part of our mandate as teachers to provide that education to our students. For example, I'm educating all my students in digital technology – editing, Pro Tools, Audacity, the differences between a ribbon and condenser mic, it's all become an essential part of the education for a modern, innovative student. You've got to practise your Ibert, scales, bebop, digital editing... oh, and you better be a good educator too, because some of your initial job prospects after college are in private teaching.'

His emphasis on diversity also extends to saxophone repertoire. 'You better play it all and love it all, that's my mentality,' he says. 'Do not judge. Take advantage of the fact we have Adams and Adès, Bizet and Birtwistle, Glazunov and Glass. If you shut yourself off from any of that you are going to find it hard to work in this field, and you're also not a real saxophone player, in my opinion.' ■

The sheet music for John Adams' Saxophone Concerto is available from Boosey & Hawkes.

Timothy McAllister: Selected discography

Soloist and chamber musician:

- *Adams: City Noir*, LA Philharmonic (2009). Also available on DVD as *The Inaugural Concert: Gustavo Dudamel*
- *John Mackey Soprano Sax Concerto* – ASU Wind Symphony (2012)
- *Music of John Cage* – Simone Mancuson, percussion (2012)
- *John Adams: City Noir; Saxophone Concerto* – St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (2014).
Grammy winner
- *Belle Nuit* – Kathryn Goodson, piano (2015)
- *Zae Munn: They Were Mysterious Guests* – chamber works with alto saxophone (2015)
- *Spiritualist: Kenneth Fuchs*, featuring 'Rush' Saxophone Concerto – London Symphony Orchestra (2018). **Grammy winner**
- *Lost Horizon: Guillaume Connesson* (2019), featuring 'A Kind of Trane' Saxophone Concerto, Brussels Philharmonic
- *Westland: Andy Scott* – Liz Ames, piano (2020)
- *Notturmo* – Liz Ames, piano (2020)

PRISM Quartet:

- *The Singing Gobi Desert* (2013)
- *Music of Matthew Levy* (2014)
- *Heritage/Evolution* (2014)
- *The Fifth Century*, featuring The Crossing chamber choir (2016).
Grammy winner
- *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral* (2019)
- *Surfaces and Essences* (2020)

