

Tôn-Thât Tiêt... et coule la rivière...

Tôn-Thât Tiêt... and the river flows...

Documentary (production Les signes de l'arc)

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Documentary subtitles :

The composer Tôn-Thât Tiêt was born in 1933 in Vietnam, in Hué, by the River of Perfumes.

Each creator, writer, composer and painter must first and foremost have an idea, an idea of the universe, a vision of life. Generally speaking, a creator must have a thought process, we cannot be like robots. In every work of art there is something that stems from our thoughts. I usually take an extra-musical idea as in Ngu Hanh II or Chu Ky ; I meditate on this idea and the music comes afterwards. I have written a fairly long opus : Le Chemin du Bouddha (the Path of Buddha), consisting of an hour and a half of music. I spent 4 or 5 years meditating, but only 4 months in the actual writing ! It takes me much longer to think about my subject than to write the notes, because after that process, everything is like a ripe fruit, ready to be picked.

Here I often went by the Marne river to work, but in Crouesty, Brittany, I often walked to the top of a cliff. I work with the sea, I really need to be outside a lot, before actually writing anything down, in front of a desk.

I have written 2 or 3 works on colours – sound colours, silence colours, and so on. I have a picture of a painter I know, Vinh An, called Silence et Prière (Silence and Prayer). He painted the moon and a church at night. I'm very fond of this painting, it inspires me to write about colours. I have written Couleur du Son (Sound of Colour), Couleur du Silence (Sound of Silence) et Couleur du Temps (Sound of Time) with a harp – clarinet and harp – and Couleur de la Vacuité (Colour of Void).

The evening breeze grazes the plum-tree boughs
Lost temple merged in the sleeping field
The evening prayer sounds forth – vacuity
Moonlight rouses the slumbering mind

It isn't about real colour, actual colour, but colours in my mind's eye. For example, I see the note E and a chord in E flat ; I see a colour corresponding to that chord, and specifically that note, but I cannot translate it, or specify a colour, the colour exists in my head ! I see the colours but they aren't those seen with the eyes, like red, white or yellow....

As for the river, it is because it's the River of Perfumes, the river of the town where I was born. The image of this river is impressed in my mind, a form of nostalgia, as it were. I wrote this music while thinking of my birthplace and the days of my youth and, too, because this river is very dear to me.

Why not return to the hamlet of Reeds
See the rising sun on the rows of areca
A garden glowing like green jade
A perfect face through the bamboo boughs

The wind follows the wind's route, the clouds the cloud's way
Sorrow of flowing water, quivering of corn in bloom
Whose is this raft, moored on the banks of the moon
Shall it have time to carry her in the night ?
The traveller dreams on the distant road, distant...
Your robe is too white, I cannot discern it
Here beings are shrouded in mist and smoke
Who knows the depths of such love ?
(Hàn Mac Tu)

Some time ago I did some work on traditional music. Together with my friends in France we created a society called « France Vietnam pour la Musique » (France-Vietnam for Music) to help traditional musicians to further their work. We organised concert tours here in order to preserve traditional music in its authentic form, because nowadays traditional music has been considerably changed, modified and modernized. To my mind, this isn't a good thing, it's a great threat for the future. If we continue like this, traditional music will gradually be lost. Traditional music cannot be harmonized ; applying Western harmonics to traditional music, such as I have heard it done in Vietnam, cannot work. In my music you can frequently observe repeated notes ; this comes from traditional music in the Centre, from Hué, the town where I was born.

Water is the flowing of time. There, it is time recurring in cycles, as in Chu Ky for example. But if you consider the universe, it too evolves in cyclical forms, the sun, the earth, the stars, the galaxies, it is always in cycles. Linear time, that is to say History, is past, present, future. But when I speak of global time, there is no past, present, future, it is a whole !

When I write music I don't see time passing... This is why in most of my works there is no ending as in Western music, to signify the end. I let things continue to flow, but the end is contained in this.

This is why there must be a great amount of silence. I see the silence of the universe where an element has been born ; it unfolds then ends. The silence after this ending is not neutral like the initial silence because it is followed by many things, many events. The silence at the beginning is neutral, extraneous to the human being and at the end it is the silence of human nature. For example, Wang Wei speaks of nature but the spirit of Buddha is also present. Li Po speaks of nature too, but it is different. In China it is said that Li Po was a celestial being exiled on earth, he committed a transgression and was exiled to a life on earth.

I am asked why I live on this blue mount
I give no answer, but smile, my soul at peace.
Peach blossoms, a tranquil spring
This sky, this earth, do they pertain to man ?
(Li Po)

At dawn, I drink at the Heavenly Lady's lake
At sunset I knock at Heaven's door
Alone with my precious Zither
I enter the dark mountain. Night falls.
Frost in the moonlight is white sheen.
In the pines, the wind is still. The night is calm
Immortals stroll on the blue peaks.
I hear the rising songs and the music of mouth organs
And remain silent, bathed in moonlight.
The Taoist temple is lost in the landscape.
Like the phoenix, I dance, swirling to the rhythm of Dragon and Tiger
Stroking the sky, gathering the star of Pao Kuo
And in my trance, forget to turn back.
I raise my hand, fondling the Milky Way
Gripping the Weaver's loom.
All at once the sun rises. Everything grows dim
Only the many-coloured clouds drift across the sky.
(Li Po)

I have chosen to speak about Man as in L'Amour Universel (Universal Love) : Kiem Ai. I see a world in which Man lives in brotherhood, but it is Utopian... This idea is very dear to me, that's the reason why I have tried to express it through this work.

In his Conversations, Confucius said that we must consider each person like a brother. Many years after the end of World War II, the following sentence could be seen at the United Nations Centre in New York : «Men are brothers in all four corners of the world ». These words are taken from Confucius. They correspond perfectly to the United Nations concept. Mao wanted this sentence to be removed because at that time Mao Tsé-tung wished to destroy every trace of what went before, but this is much to be regretted, it's a neutral statement, a beautiful idea.

Tchouang-tseu's idea is as follows : we are here, we do our job, each of us has a mission. There's no point in questioning this ; since I was born here, I know not why, I have entered the world of music and I compose. Because I'm a composer, I compose, that's all there is to it !

When I work, I forget all these notions, I enter an inner world.

Translation : Lilian and Jean Rossi