

## Letter dated 25/02/1996

Dear Laurence.

Here are a few words to add to my response to your two questions : nostalgia and cinema.

### - Nostalgia, or the will to affirm one's identity ?

For a long time I have wished to kindle the spirit of traditional Vietnamese music through my works. Firstly I have used the instrumental technique of this music, and secondly I have instilled a personal character into my musical language. Philosophy, or philosophical thought has played an important rôle in my compositions. As time goes by, I am turning more and more to Buddhism with a tinge of Taoism. This tendency also brings about a more thorough usage of the instrumental technique of music made in Hué such as court music and Buddhist music (*Moments Rituels I (Ritual Moments I)*, *Dang Phung Vu or Suite chorégraphique (Choreographic Suite)*, *Prajna Paramita...*). Percussion was already playing an important part in my music and is becoming more important in more recent works. The importance does not lie in the number of instruments made use of but rather the part occupied by percussion in these works. Sometimes the number of percussion instruments is reduced to a small number of skin instruments (*Ritual Moments I*).

As well as composing music, I have launched a campaign for the preservation of traditional music and its specific stamp. I underline the word '*stamp*' or '*authenticity*', because today this music is modified in order to comply with tourism !

The "*Association France Vietnam for music*" was founded in 1994 not only to celebrate the conservation and development of traditional Vietnamese music, but also to help to develop present-day music in Vietnam. This activity has taken up much of my time, but it gives me great pleasure. Is it nostalgia, or the love of my natal soil ? Perhaps these activities reflect my path, or my conception of creation : tradition must be delved into if one wishes to venture towards a distant horizon. Tradition is a guarantee of not going astray in a constantly changing world.

I have often developed this idea in seminars or conferences on musical creation today. It isn't intended to be a form of education, but only a suggestion or a guide-line to young people.

### - Film music

I entered the world of cinema purely by chance ; after the "*success*" of TRAN-ANH Hung's film *L'Odeur de la Papaye Verte (the Scent of the Green pawpaw)*, I received several letters of congratulation. I was also invited by universities to speak on the subject of "Music-Image".

In all honesty, I am not a real composer for film, that is to say someone well-versed in the subject.

For the music of *The Scent of the Green Pawpaw*, I wrote it intuitively. I shared the life of the characters, trying to understand their innermost thoughts, all in my imagination, because I wrote the music before the shooting of the film.

It is often said that the music of a film is its soul. If this is the case, the music needs to help the image to speak of feelings and ideas when the image is not able to do this, the music's rôle in a film is highly important. Sometimes music may be beautiful but speechless. In a composium on the theme of "Music-Image" it was said that the rôle of music in cinema

should be looked at more closely. It's an interesting subject. I'm not familiar enough with the world of cinema to be able to speak on the topic.

Composing the music for *The Scent of the Green Pawpaw* was an experience, an adventure. For TRAN ANH Hung's 2<sup>nd</sup> film *Cyclo* the work was different. It was no longer an adventure, Trân-Anh Hung gave me an extremely rich scenario. I had to school myself to follow along his lines and to compose music both varied and strong. Here too, the music doesn't follow the image, even in the violent sequences, it speaks of the idea hidden within these images. Even if the music for each of these two films is not perfect on a musical plan, I am happier with the music of *Cyclo* than with that of *The Scent of the Green Pawpaw*. It may be because it was better put together and I considered it like a suite for ballet. Strangely, it made me think of Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin*.

Hung and I have spoken about musical language and film music. Do we have to continue writing tonal music for films ? For my part, I can no longer write tonal music, I need to write simpler music for cinema but it still remains toneless. Hung agrees with me about this. As cinema evolves, so does film music. This does not signify that we have to use "modern" music for cinema, whatever the circumstances. Sometimes a string quartet from Schubert's repertoire fits the bill perfectly. My collaboration with TRAN ANH Hung is very useful. It familiarizes me with stage music evoking the idea of opera. I wrote *Le chemin de Bouddha* (*The path of Buddha*), music for stage, or ballet. I need a little more courage to tackle opera. So far I have dealt with nearly all the musical forms, except opera.

I would like you to speak more about my activities supporting music in Vietnam. Today these activities mean as much to me as composing does.

Thank you for the work you are doing.

Sincerely .

Translation : Lilian and Jean Rossi