

CD Dialogue avec la nature

(Calliope CAL 9268)

Dialogue avec la nature / Vô-Vi / Préludes à un dialogue

The French composer of Vietnamese origin TÔN-THẬT Tiêt was born in Huê in 1933. Drawn to Western culture, he moved to Paris in 1958, where he studied composition with Jean Rivier and André Jolivet. After familiarizing himself with serial music, he gradually forged his own style, combining the compositional styles of the post-Webern school with an Oriental way of thinking. In his works, he strives to evoke the spirit of traditional Vietnamese music, particularly sacred music and music of the Court of Huê, the former imperial capital. In the East, music, like every other art form, is always related to philosophical thought. Thus, TÔN-THẬT Tiêt uses his musical idiom to convey his spiritual research and his attempt to understand the Universe and Nature through Eastern philosophy: the Yi Jing or “Book of Changes” in Chinese philosophy, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Two main themes run through his music: “Man and Humanity”, represented most characteristically by *Kiem Ai* (Universal Love) for choruses and large orchestra; and “Man and the Universe”, as in the set of seven *Chu Ky* (Cycle) and *Jeux des cinq Eléments* (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth). In 1998, TÔN-THẬT Tiêt composed an important work about Buddhism, *Prajna Paramita* for six voices and instrumental ensemble. He also composed the music for the films by Tran-Anh Hung, *The Scent of the Green Papaya* and *Cyclo*. Apart from the prizes he was awarded at the Paris Conservatoire (CNSM), he has received several awards and distinctions, including the SACEM Prize in 1971, the Lili Boulanger Prize in 1972, the Unesco International Composers Prize in 1975, the Bourse de l'Création (awarded by the French Ministry of Culture) in 1981, and the Georges Delerue “Best Music” Award at the Flanders International Festival in 1995.

Les Préludes à un Dialogue consist of five preludes for two guitars, dedicated to the duo Jean Horreaux and Jean-Marie Tréhard. In the mood they create, these pieces revive certain aspects of traditional Far Eastern music. The writing in quarter tones, the use of a plectrum in the first prelude, and the percussive pizzicatos in the second, evoke the sounds of Asian lutes, such as the moon-shaped lute or the biwa (a pear-shaped, plucked lute). As they play the garlands of arpeggios note by note, the guitars also remind us of the playing technique of various types of zither. The rhythmic passages show the influence of music from the Court of Huê: the repetition of a note or rhythmic formula, around which a sort of improvisation is built up, is a compositional device that is typical of TÔN-THẬT Tiêt. He composed these

Préludes in 1989, just after *Prajna Paramita*. In his presentation of the piece, TÔN-THẬT Tiêt wrote: "After writing *Prajna Paramita*, based on a Buddhist text, I now plunge further into that doctrine. Buddhism and Hinduism, with the new thought of modern Indian thinkers, helped me to adopt an attitude towards the world and towards life [...] but they do not give me complete satisfaction as to the existence of the soul: I see a universe with spirit, but not a universe consisting purely of matter." In the third *prélude*, we find long, meditative episodes in which the note G resounds: this note, which is omnipresent in all of TÔN-THẬT Tiêt works, symbolises the cosmic spirit, "the single spirit which engenders the world". The fourth *prélude* gravitates around the note F, endlessly repeated in triplets. The note F represents the Earth and the Centre, an idea closely akin to that of the 'happy medium' in Chinese philosophy, when the spirit is in a state of harmony and balance. Through the role that is given to these two symbolical notes, these *préludes* express the research that each of us can undertake in order to become one with the universe and attain a state of Awareness through meditation. TÔN-THẬT Tiêt adds: "Where does the soul come from, and where does it go? The question has no answer; Nature remains forever silent. The never-ending return, the never-ending solitude. Alone with nature..."

Vô Vi, composed in 1974, is dedicated to Nadia Boulanger. It was written for two string ensembles: an orchestra and a quartet. The sound effect, resulting from the arrangement of the two groups, creates a feeling of space. "Vô Vi" means "non-action". This idea, developed by Taoism, teaches us the attitude we should adopt towards life. "Non-action means that we must not go against the evolution of nature, but that we must live in perfect communion with it, by following the natural rhythm, life's natural motion." Expressing that "non-action", the music takes shape and develops spontaneously. The work does not follow any particular structure; rather, it gives the impression of an improvisation, as if it were following the natural evolution of a watercourse. Thus, the music is, in turn, calm like a stream, violent like a waterfall, changing like a river and serene like a lake. Towards the end of the work, the musical discourse becomes more and more static, stretching out until it seems to be suspended in time. In giving importance to events that are very subtle, *Vô Vi* leads us to the verge of silence and forces our attention to listen more intensely to what lies within the sound.

Dialogue avec la Nature (1995) is a concerto for two guitars and orchestra. After a *prélude* reasserting the importance of the note F, the work opens with the sound of a temple bell, such as may be heard in Buddhist temples, sounding as an invitation to meditate. *Dialogue avec la Nature* proposes that we "leave aside the affairs of this world and enter into an imaginary conversation". TÔN-THẬT Tiêt refers to a poem by the great eighteenth-century Chinese poet, Li Po: "...From the mountain rise fragrant clouds, flowers shower down from the sky, the cry of monkeys resounds; suddenly I forget the affairs of this world, at one with the scenery that lies about me." The guitarists have to imagine they are "playing upon a mountain top and conversing with their natural surroundings: the trees, the mist, the sky,

the air, but also the town that lies down below, and with human beings, animals, and even stones and rocks... in short, with nature". The soloists hold a dialogue with the orchestra, which, like nature, presents contrasts, sometimes violent, sometimes very calm. From the orchestra, the harp, mainly in a low register, answers them, like a third guitar. The note G disappears in the immensity and tranquility of the universe, suggested at the end of the composition by the superposing of a low F and a high G. At the end of this spiritual quest, TÔN-THẬT Tiêt leaves the question open: "We may or may not attain the cosmic spirit: it is up to each one of us to provide the answer. Music speaks where words end, and where music ends we must let nature speak. Nature answers in silence and, alone with the silence that lies deep down within our souls, we grasp the meaning of that dialogue."

Laurence Bancaud
(Translation: M.R.P)