

CD Ensemble Intercontemporain and Geneviève Ibanez

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*Niêm / Trung Dzuong / Métal-Terre-Eau / Terre-Feu / Jeu des Cinq Éléments I
/ Jeu des Cinq Éléments III*

The Vietnamese composer TÔN-THẬT TIẾT was born in 1933. Although he has lived in Paris since 1958 the memory of his native country has never left him, and his compositions seem to conjure up the countryside around his home town of Hué. The sudden bursts of violence in his music, occurring side by side with songs of hope and peace, can also be seen to reflect the tragedy of the Vietnam War.

Tôn-Thật Tiết's music is imbued with the instrumental sounds of Eastern countries such as Vietnam, Japan, China, Indonesia and India : he remains highly sensitive to the colours of traditional Vietnamese music and to the atmosphere of Indian ragas with their complex polyrhythms.

The influence of Eastern tradition is made evident not by the borrowing of traditional instruments or exotic scales, but rather by its subtle presence in the background of Tôn-Thật Tiết's music, permeating his musical language. The emotional power of sound and the richness of silence as used in Eastern music hold great fascination for the composer.

Initially drawn to Western culture, Tôn-Thật Tiết later returned to a more Eastern mode of thought. He avoided involvement with post-Webernism and did not work extensively with serial theory, which was too restrictive to allow him to express his ideas freely. Tôn-Thật Tiết's style is at the meeting point of two contrasting cultures, and like many Eastern composers, he uses Western technology in Support of a genuinely oriental way of thinking.

With Tôn-Thật Tiết, the music of East and West fuse together and give rise to a highly personal musical Style, which relies more on "sounds " than "notes " ! The general sonic effect and the intrinsic quality of each sound take precedence over theoretical considerations.

By bringing together his Eastern sensitivity and his knowledge of Western technique, Tôn-Thật Tiết has created a truly innovative language, opening up new perspectives for contemporary music.

Through his compositions, Tôn-Thất Tiêt seeks to express his vision of Man and the Universe, with reference to oriental philosophies such as Confucianism, Hinduism and Buddhism.

The four works *Jeu des 5 Éléments I*, *Terre-Feu*, *Métal-Terre-Eau* and *Jeu des 5 Éléments III* belong to a series of etudes based on the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire and earth).

“The five elements with their links (Fire produces Earth, Earth produces Metal, Metal produces Water, Water produces Wood, and Wood produces Earth), and their oppositions (Fire destroys Metal, Metal destroys Wood, Wood destroys Earth, Earth destroys Water, and Water destroys Fire) constitute the basis for the evolution of the Universe, according to the Book of Mutations of Chinese philosophy. The elements also represent directions (Metal-West, Wood-East, Water-North, Fire-South and Earth-Centre) and sounds (Metal-G, Wood-A, Water-D, Fire-C and Earth-F)”.

The piece for violin *Métal, Terre, Eau* uses three notes as its basic elements : G, F and D. The words also contain a recurring rhythmic pattern largely based on the figure 5.

All four works illustrate the idea of a universe that is in movement, in perpetual evolution. They have no clearly defined form, since they depend on the links between the elements.“ Their structure is vague, like the structure of Life. Chance governs their links”.

The music thus takes on a cosmic aspect as the Elements, like molecules of sound, are transformed by cosmic energies and forces.

Trung Dzuong was composed in 1980 as a homage to Vietnam, a country ravaged by war, and to the boat people. The work was written “to the memory of all those who suffer and perish in the China Sea”, and bears the following epigraph : “Abyss how many lives have disappeared into the silence of your heart”. The general lack of response to the drama of the boat people was also in Tôn-Thất Tiêt's mind as he wrote.

The first sounds to be heard are slow, low, barely perceptible, portraying a motionless and disturbing sea from which a few deadened cries gradually emerge. Waves appear and gather strength until the sea explodes in a fury. After this outburst of violence, the end of the work appears as a song of hope for Vietnam. Repeated high chords sound like the tolling of bells, like a call. An expressive melody begins in the middle register and drops progressively to low C, the work's pole. The superposing of low C and a high chord is often used by Tôn-Thất Tiêt to suggest the immensity and peacefulness of the universe.

“In Composing this work I prayed for these souls to join with the soul of the Universe.”
According to Buddhism, our world is an illusion : “Man was born out of nothing and will return to nothing like a star which appears in the Universe only to disappear again”.

Niêm, for alto flute and harp, is inspired from the same sources and encourages a meditative attitude. The *niêm* is a prayer, a Buddhist meditation. The work is “both a scream and a prayer spoken in a chaotic world. A non-religious prayer, for a fairer world without hate where Man could live in fraternity. Sounds brush against or strike a wall of silence as though to awaken Man’s conscience”.

Niêm is written in a somewhat stark manner, unfolding like the echo of some faraway rite. The melody in the flute appears from the depths of silence and rises up with a meditative invocatory character. It “loses itself in nothingness as the human spirit, through meditation, melts into the cosmic spirit”.

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