

Conversation dated 09.01.2007

Laurence Bancaud : What childhood and adolescence memories have you of Vietnam ?

Tôn-Thật Tiêt : I was born in a family that had been part of the mandarinat for centuries. My father held a high rank in the mandarinat under the monarchy. I was one of ten children of both genders. My childhood was calm and quite happy. I had some uncles on my father's side who were interested in music but no more. On my mother's side I had an uncle who was an accomplished lute player – traditional music – and a cousin, his son, who played the violin. It was he who gave me my first violin lessons, encouraged by my elder brother. No one in the family thought that one day I would follow the path of music, and neither did I. My father died in 1953. I don't know how I came to be able to play music because the whole family was against the idea. It was very difficult for me to bring anyone round to anything like that. From an early age I was aware of the beauty of nature and of music – traditional music.

You spent your childhood in the context of the Indochinese war : how did this affect you ?

We lived in peace and quiet, I only became aware of the war in 1946, when my elder brother, the one who had encouraged my interest in music, was killed in the battle of Hué. I was 13 years old. Since then I have lived with the memory of his words and how he thought that life should be lived : being generous, being modest.

What kind of training did you have in Vietnam, what did you learn ?

I studied the violin, the theory of music, harmony and counterpoint with private tutors in Hué. At this time there were no Schools of Music in Vietnam. The three conservatories in Hanoi, Hué and Saigon were created after 1956. I remember that 2 years after the Geneva Treaty, in 1956, the town of Saigon organized the Bicentenary of Mozart's birth, and the conservatory of Saigon was inaugurated at the same time. I went to Saigon to attend the festival concerts and enrolled at the Conservatory in the composition classes. I ended up deciding to go to France for my musical studies.

Why France, and how did you manage it ?

I chose France, because I had to go to Europe for my music studies, and in Vietnam, it was France we were familiar with. It was out of curiosity too, I wanted to discover France, but in order to be allowed to travel abroad I had to have a pretext, and I asked for permission to follow my music studies in Paris. I was given a three-years grant. Initially I had intended to continue studying the violin, but I realized that it wasn't possible, and it didn't take long for me to give up that idea in order to devote all of my time to composition. Yet when I arrived in France, the thought of composition had not crossed my mind. I thought that at the completion of my studies in writing I would go back to my native land and teach music.

What were your musical skills when you arrived in France ?

Almost inexistent ! Concerning classical music, I was only just acquainted with Bach and Mozart. As for music dating from the second half of the 19th century like Wagner, I hadn't heard of it and I knew nothing at all about the 20th century, all I had was some pieces by Debussy on a record. My

knowledge of music was very limited. All I knew was the names of some composers, and their styles... from reading books on the history of music. There was nothing in Vietnam in those days !

What about your training in Paris ?

When I entered the Ecole Normale de Musique, I realized that I knew nothing ! It took me a long time to make up for my deficiencies, the teaching I had followed in Vietnam left a lot to be desired. Fortunately, I quickly made up for lost time and was able to graduate after two years.

I entered Georges Dandelot's class for harmony, and Madame Honegger's class for counterpoint. My first 2 years in Paris were above all about coming into close contact with the world of music ; after that I entered the CNSM (the National Superior Conservatory of Music) in 1960, in classes for counterpoint and fugue. After meeting with the other students, I realized that I would have to advance much more quickly in order to catch up with the others. It was a race against time to acquire as much knowledge as I could. At this time I went to listen to concerts all over the place, and I read avidly. I was in Mme Desportes' class for fugue and Mr Noël Gallon's for counterpoint.

Then, I believed , you became the pupil of Jean Rivier and André Jolivet.

Following the advice of my teachers I entered Jean Rivier's composition class in 1962. I remained there for four years, culminating in three awards in his class in 1966. I must tell you a little tale : near the end of my studies under his direction, Jean Rivier spoke well of me in front of the other pupils. Pointing at me he said : "This pupil is able to go far ! I must say, however, that I didn't want to have you in my class at first, because your music, quite honestly... !" That's the reason why, upon my arrival in his class, when he saw the kind of music I was writing, in a Debussy-like style, he told me to put all that behind me ! It was no good of thinking of that kind of music, it had to be another kind.

What sort of person was Jean Rivier and what approach did he have to his teaching ?

Mr Rivier's lessons were a meeting-place for all types of tendencies and ideas. Sometimes he transformed the lesson into a discussion between students, of various subjects, such as painting, etc...

In an indirect way he advised me to look more closely into philosophy, especially the oriental mindset, to help me to find a style of my own.

He was a really friendly, generous person. At the beginning, I subsisted on a grant from the Vietnamese government, but it was only for three years. My father had long been deceased and my family couldn't afford to send me any money. I was able to live on the university premises but only had the bare necessities, about 250 francs a month : my room cost 150 francs a month. Jean Rivier obtained some free-meal tickets for me, a gesture I found very moving.

You were also André Jolivet's pupil.

Yes, in 1966 I asked Mr Jolivet if I might attend his lessons as an unregistered student. I appreciated his music. I learnt little of musical technique from him, but there were very important ideas on composition, that were seminal in my case ; he had us listen to a lot of music during his lessons.

He often arrived at his classes well before the hour, and so did I, so we chatted, not about music, but of many other things. He was open-minded. Look at this passage from Lucie Kayas' book :

We spoke of very different things, and sometimes about the metaphysical aspect of oriental music. But in those days the problem of the life of the universe wasn't really on my mind. Today, looking back, I can see the importance of these conversations more clearly.

[...] In his capacity of teacher, he never sought to direct me towards a specific style, and our relationship was spiritual. Unwittingly he helped me to go deeper into the idea suggested by Jean Rivier : "You must return to the Orient to look for your style." Mr. Rivier guided me as to form, in

language, and Mr Jolivet suggested my considering music as a means of expression rather an end in itself.

You didn't attend Olivier Messiaen's lessons ?

I was over the age limit! but his way of teaching Analysis was of great interest to me : he didn't dissect the work in minute detail, but sought to analyse the inner meaning.

Which other pupils were studying these lessons at the same time as you ? Were any of them among composers with whom you later had a relationship ?

I can still remember classmates like Paul Méfano, Michel Decouet, Jean-Paul Holstein, Yves Level, Edith Lejet, Nicole Lachartre, Thérèse Brenet, Pierre Grouvel, Masato Uchida, William Bolcom, Alain Moëne..... I often say to my friends : the most precious thing in our lives is friendship. Music is another matter, it isn't more important than friendship, friendship needs to be held on to. Concerning Radio, I knew Germaine Canat, Marius Constant, Charles Chaymes and we have always kept in touch – Marius Constant has since died, but there are still links with Germaine Canat. She said something very sad to me : "When I was there, in Radio, I had many friends, but now that I'm no longer there, I have none at all!" She had an important rôle, she was in charge of contemporary music. Nowadays no one thinks of her. That's why I say that friendship goes far beyond simple self-interest.

I also have instrumentalist friends like Charles Frey. They are chiefly friends from Jean Rivier's class. André Jolivet took over Jean Rivier's class and younger pupils appeared like Taïra, Philippe Hersant, but I was less familiar with them.

Can you see any points in common with, or running along the same lines as the path you have followed ? Are there any consistent éléments in his teaching which caused you to find your path ?

I think that I, on the one hand, and my friends have no points in common. I'm of Asian roots, my thinking tends to be Oriental and is somewhat different to that of my friends.

In Jean Rivier's class there were persons who wrote only serial music, and he accepted that. Other persons were writing exactly the opposite kind of music, which he also accepted. Jean Rivier knew nothing of serial music, the serial theory, but he let the pupil play in that style : if the music was beautiful he accepted it, for example in the case of Jean-Pierre Guézec, Decoust, Mefano. Jean Rivier gave his lessons in his own home, like Milhaud. It was like being part of a family. It was great fun. At the beginning Tisné, who was older than I, was there, so was Michel Fustet. I also saw Tisné in Mr Gallon's class.

You knew Maurice Ohana quite well. What sort of relationship did you have ?

I was introduced to Ohana by Alain Kremsky at a concert in 1970. He took a great interest in young composers. When I went to work with Jobert's Editions in 1973, I worked on his music and had some contacts with him. Little by little we became friends. We were very close, I was very fond of him, but as to music our ideas were rather different. For instance, I like Wagner's music (though not all of it) but he could not stand him . So as to avoid any arguments, I didn't introduce subjects which might have disturbed him.

Like André Jolivet, he was outside the sphere of serial music, and quite independent

That's right, in fact he was allergic to serial music! He hated it. The subject had to be avoided. One day I told him that I had accepted this form. That what counted for me, was that the music was beautiful, and the rest didn't matter, but he didn't share that point of vue. When we broached a

difficult subject, he exploded. You hadn't to mention the name of Boulez! In 1986 Boulez asked me to create a piece of music for the Ensemble Intercontemporain. At that very time Ohana had just finished his opera *La Celestine* and he needed someone to write an orchestral reduction - modifying the score, making it only for piano; he would have liked me to take this on, but I explained that it wasn't possible because I had a commission from Boulez. He was rather vexed, yet was present at the first performance of the work.

Consider a text in the book on Ohana :

He always asked me : "Do you work ?" yes, I do, but not all the time. The temperament of real Asians -I don't mean those who have taken on the Western mind-set – is to leave enough time to really live, to keep in touch with nature. It's another way of working.

Maurice too, when at Carnac, spent a lot of time going at the sea ; that's part of working too. Work isn't only what goes on at one's desk.

You, the people born in the west, believe that man is the center of the universe ; but we, in Asia, believe that man is part of the universe. We are tiny creatures. This may be a concept that Maurice found embodied in me.

You told me that you felt close to György Ligeti, and his world of sound. Can you tell me in which way ? are you thinking of any particular works ?

I don't know whether I feel close to Ligeti. I like his music on the whole. I like the colour sound of his music, and its structure. There's a certain "haziness" in his music which reminds me of Turner's paintings, it's an impression. I must admit that I don't know all his works.

Personally, I've never felt a rush of feeling before a particular work of his.

Penderecki surprised me when I first heard his music. The Warsaw school !

Rodetski came to present his music in Jean Rivier's class : that surprised me too. For a while I was influenced by this kind of music. For instance we can see the latter in *Hy Vong 14*, by the means of blocks of sound, as in Penderecki's or Ligeti's works. There are possibly two composers who incited in me a certain style, or language : first the Warsaw school composers and secondly Webern's music.

For it's refined character ?

Yes. Up to now, no one has discerned a trace of Webern in my music. For example if you listen to just an early work like *Five pieces for oboe and piano* the piano part is similar in character to Webern's music, as in the pieces for piano. Only with a meditative element, from the Orient. Even in the beginning, there was a mixture from both sides.

Did you meet Edgar Varèse (whose pupil André Jolivet was) ? Did his work interest you or influence you ?

Edgar Varèse helped me broaden my writing, but my aesthetics are different from his.

I accept all styles and aesthetics – all music in fact – I mean music world-wide. Each composer has his share of beautiful things as well as less interesting elements.

Henri Dutilleux is the president fo your association France-Vietnam for music. What sort of relationship do you enjoy ?

I'm not one of Henri Dutilleux's pupils but he often stood in for André Jolivet during the times he was absent from Paris. One day he came to Jean Rivier's class to have us listen to his second symphony and I went to hear the recording. There's a Chinese proverb which goes : "if you have learnt a word, or even half a word from someone, you must consider him to be your master."

I followed André Dutilleux closely. When Munch recorded his second symphony, I went to listen. I'm still in touch with him. I like to listen to him. One day he told me that he had seen the film *L'Odeur de*

la papaye verte (The scent of the Green pawpaw) : “the music is lovely but you shouldn’t write film music too often”. Perhaps he sees people like Georges Delerue who wrote interesting pieces at first ; once he had entered the film music world, that was that ; he did nothing else ; there are elements of beauty, but of little interest : such music cannot get away from the cinema context.

When did you go back to Vietnam, were you unable to during these years of studying ?

No, I couldn’t go back during the war, nor could I afford to. I would have liked to, because my mother was still there. I was able to make my first trip home in 1982. My mother was still alive.

Les jardins d’autre monde (The Gardens of another world) : there are links with the court music of Huế, above all the percussions . if you listen to court music, then to mine, you can see where my way of inserting percussion into my music came from.

In *Poeme (Poem)*, we can see the Ca tru. If someone listens to a little Ca tru beforehand, he can easily step into both examples of this music, the Ca tru and contemporary music.

Translation : Lilian and Jean Rossi