

# *Jeu des Cinq Éléments (The Interplay of the Five elements), analytical elements*

## Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Earth

### Theory of the 5 elements of Chinese philosophy

Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth are the five Elements which form the base of the universe according to the Chinese. A whole system of classification connects the Five Elements to everything that makes up human life and the universe: the elements are linked with the seasons, the directions, the five senses, colours, etc... and, for the composer, with notes of music.

Metal/G, Water/D, Wood/A, Fire/C, Earth/F.

These 5 elements engender the following: Fire produces Earth, Earth begets Metal, Metal Water, Water Wood and Wood Fire.

They also engender destruction or domination: Fire destroys Metal, Metal destroys Wood, Wood Earth, Earth Water and Water Fire.

Through this system of classification of the five Elements the Chinese conceive the world, the perception of all material and human phenomena, of Man and the Universe.

Tôn-Thât Tiêt has composed a series of pieces around this Five Elements interplay. Each piece of the series is constructed according to selected major Elements, and therefore major notes acting as both structures and polarisations.

The form of each piece is determined by the Elements chosen, depending on where they meet, thus depicting an ever-moving universe.

The piece to be analysed is *Jeu des Cinq Éléments I (the Interplay of the Five Elements I)*, bearing in mind that the other pieces, namely *Interplay of the Five Elements II, III and IV, Terre-Feu (Earth-Fire), Métal-Terre-Eau (Metal-Earth-Water), Bois-Terre (Wood-Earth)*, are constructed according to the same principles.

## *Jeu des Cinq Éléments I (Interplay of the Five Elements I)*

*Jeu des Cinq Éléments I (Interplay of the Five Elements I)* for violin and cello is in fact the superposing of two pieces: *Metal-Earth-Water* for violin and *Wood-Earth* for cello. They can be played separately or simultaneously as long as certain playing rules, those of the Five Elements, with correspondences and the oppositions, are followed. The violin's part is played in an identical manner, it is the cello's part that is adapted. Tôn-Thât-Tiêt had already conceived the two pieces according to the same scheme of arrangement.

*Interplay of the Five Elements I* is composed of seven parts: A, B, C, D, E, F and G. It's an arch-like form, as it were. In fact the A and G parts make up an introduction and a conclusion both of which unfold in a calm atmosphere. In the other parts there will be alternate phases of the development and the destruction of the Elements. The culminating point is in the central part, D, in a very agitated passage in which the aleatory principle can be found.

The form of this piece - like that of the others on the theme of the Elements - is determined by those Elements which are chosen, their encounters and their oppositions, their development or their destruction. Since the process is partly unpredictable, the analysis of the piece requires a linear method.

The violin part (*Metal-Earth-Fire*) is mainly based on the same notes *G, F, D* and the cello part (*Wood-Earth*) on the two notes *A-F*.

The first part A [p.1 to 4] comprises the introduction. The violin presents its three main Elements in a consecutive manner: Water (D), Metal (G) and Earth (F). For the moment the cello only presents the Element Wood (A) which is more prominent than the element Earth since Wood destroys Earth. On the other hand the secondary Element Fire (C) appears since in the correspondences, Wood produces Fire.

**A** 12" ca sul III ① 5" 4" 3" 2"

Violon sul IV vibr { PPP < mp > PP < mp > p < mp

vclle p mf pp pp

pp p pp

**2** ↓ - - - - - aller à s. pont. ② on lève bridge sur le chevalet

vln mp mf p pp 6" attaque de doigt sur la corde arco norm. mp F

vclle (pp) Pizz mf p pp 4 (1=60) p pp mf

**3** 6" ca 1:120 mp ppsub.

vln P pp mf pp 6" s.p.

vclle arco gliss. 3 pp mf pp pp 3" ca harf.

Then comes the rhythmic sequence - present in all of Tôn-Thất Tiêt's works - which is exposed here and there in its contrary movement (retrograde).

A rhythmic sequence of notes with stems and beams, including triplets (3) and quintuplets (5).

This sequence is a rhythmic model quite separate from the role of the Elements. On the violin, however, it is played on the 3 major notes G, F and D (Metal, Earth, Water) [p.2-3].

The B part [p.4 to 7] is presented as a development passage. The rhythmic sequence is present throughout; it is composed quite freely and comprises disarranged fragments dispersed among groups of fast notes. Both violin and cello revolve around their respective major notes. On two occasions the cello plays fragments of the rhythmic segment on notes around the A (Wood). It plays these same rhythms on F and G (Earth and Metal); Earth is one of the major Elements. The presence of Metal by its side can be explained by the system of correspondences, in which Earth produces Metal. On violin the rhythmic fragments are always played on the three major Elements Metal, Earth and Water as in part A, apart from these rhythmic fragments it is essentially the Element Water which stands out.

Part C is the reverse of the one before; it is in fact a piece of destruction. The rhythmic model disappears completely. The major Elements are still present at the beginning (Water, Metal and Earth on violin ; Wood on cello) but are soon drowned in a surge of rhythms and notes [p.9]. Moreover, this passage is unmeasured and the two instruments evolve separately.

The central part D [p.10 to 14] can be described as a duel between the two instruments, triggered by oppositions of the Elements. First of all the predominance of the Element Water (D) on violin must be pointed out; the cello part is a form of accompaniment in strings of semi-quavers. Water produces Wood, therefore Wood will gradually be heard on cello. Now the roles are inverted: the cello takes the lead with the Element Wood (A) and is accompanied by the violin playing strings of semi-quavers revolving round D (Water) (figure 1).

Thus the violin resorts to the aleatory principle (a free permutation of the various nuclei) [p.13]. Tô-n-Thât Tiêt often adopts this writing procedure in his works because of the mass effect of sound it creates, indicating periods of chaos. Of the various figures made to alternate, it is the Element Metal which predominates. In the system of oppositions it is Wood in fact, that is destroyed by Metal. Indeed in the cello line where the note A (Wood) dominates, the A will be imbued with the note G (Metal) and will be gradually destroyed until the cello in turn adopts the aleatory principle (figure 2). In *Wood-Earth* the Element Metal counts for little but here, in *Interplay of the Five Elements I*, it is confronted with *Metal-Earth-Water*. In this passage we can note, too, the fairly vague presence of the rhythmic model.

♩ = 69-72

mp pp mf pp mp pp

(rall.) - - - - - ♩ = 60

mf

♩ = 108

① Col legno tratto (détaché)  
(es ad lib.)

pp mormorando

♩ = 40 *accel.* → ♩ = 69

p mp p mf p mp

gliss.

♩ = 40 *accel.* → ♩ = 69

couper de temps en temps cette ligne pour placer les figures I, II, III en variant l'ordre des interventions  
 interrupt the line from time to time with figures I, II, III. Vary the order of the motives as much as possible

répéter

pp

I

II

III

$\text{arco}$   $\text{N.}$  5 3

$\text{arco}$   $\text{N.}$  3

$\text{arco}$   $\text{Pizz}$   $\text{arco}$

$\text{mf}$   $\text{mf}+$

$\text{mp}$   $\text{mf}$   $\text{pp}$   $\text{pp}$   $\text{mf}$   $\text{mf}+$

$\text{mp}$   $\text{p}$   $\text{mf}$   $\text{p}$   $\text{mp}$   $\text{p}$   $\text{mf}$

$\text{gliss.}$

5 5

irrégulièrement

( I II III )

come prima - varier autant que possible l'intervention des groupes -  
 - always varying the order of the motives -

$\text{pp}$   $\text{mp}$   $\text{mf}$

$\text{f sub.}$

$\text{mf}$   $\text{f}$   $\text{mp}$   $\text{f}$   $\text{f}$   $\text{mp}$   $\text{mf}$   $\text{f}$

( I II III )

$\text{mp}$   $\text{mf}$   $\text{mp}$   $\text{mf}$

②

pp (sans <->) (I II III)  
(come prima)

A1 A2 A3 A4

♩ = 108 pp pp pp pp

vcl

A5 B

♩ = 108 pp

♩ = 69 p mf

② violoncello • libre permutation des groupes A1, A2, A3, A4, A5 en variant les coups d'archet :  
free permutation of groups A1, A2, A3, A4, A5 using a great variety of the bowing.

- intercaler de temps en temps le groupe B entre les A : insert from time to time group B between groups A.
  - arco s.p. (détaché)
  - col legno tratto
  - arco normal, tie
- bref arrêt entre les groupes (♩ = ♪) slight pause between the groups (♩ = ♪)

(② durée: 30"ca)

arco ♩ = 88-92 mf

♩ = 69 5 mf mp

Part E [p.15 to 17] brings the various principal Elements back to the fore, as well as the rhythmic sequence which is now presented more precisely.

Part F [p.17 to 19] revolves round the Elements Water (on violin) and Wood (on cello). The violin begins to oscillate round the D (Water) in quarter-tones; against this sound background the cello seems to improvise on the Elements Wood, Earth, Metal and Water. Then, just as it took place in part D, the Element Water will engender the Element Wood. In this way the cello begins a rhythmic line on the note A, with a small number of interruptions on the note F (Earth). Little by little the rhythmic sequence will be broken up and will disappear completely in the last part.

Part G [p.20 to 22] is the work's conclusion. Once again we find ourselves in a calm atmosphere as in the beginning, contrasting with the agitation of the central part. The secondary Element Fire (C) is present on violin in superposition with the Element Wood on cello; as Wood produces Fire. During the whole of this piece it is the Element Wood on cello which remains the most important one. As for the Element Water, a dominant role from the very beginning, it is eclipsed and the violin fades out on a trill on the notes G and F. It can be noticed that both instruments end the piece on their dominant Element: on cello it is Wood that subsists while Earth disappears, since Wood destroys Earth; on violin the Element Water is destroyed by Earth along with Metal, the two Elements being in correspondence.

Other works, unconnected with the suite of *Interplay of the Five Elements*, nevertheless use the same language: in this way Tôn-Thât Tiêt refers to the symbolism of the colours in the ballet composed for *Le Chemin de Bouddha (Buddha's Path)* (1991). The dancers representing Earth are dressed in yellow costumes; they are the first to come on stage and will be there till the end. Then comes the successive appearance of the four groups of dancers symbolizing the four seasons: winter (dancers dressed in black), spring (green), summer (red) and autumn (white). The system of the correspondences between the Five Elements recurs: winter (black-Water) gives way to spring (green-Wood), since in the system Water produces Wood; spring is followed by summer (red-Fire) since Wood produces Fire and so on. We can note that autumn, a melancholy, calm season inducing meditation, is represented by white, Metal, the note G; G is very important and ubiquitous in Tôn-Thât Tiêt's works, it is associated with the idea of meditation.

This system of correspondence leads to the notion of the unity between man and the cosmos. Thus the moral and the cosmic order are in communication and are ordered by the same principle. *"In spite of their immenseness, heaven and earth are ruled by the same law of evolution; in spite of their multiplicity all beings are contingent on the sole order. [...] In the whole universe there is but one sole breath"*. (Tchouang-tseu).

## Classification of the 5 Elements

5 Elements	<b>WOOD</b>	<b>FIRE</b>	<b>EARTH</b>	<b>METAL</b>	<b>WATER</b>
Notes	A	C	F	G	D
Directions	East	South	Centre	West	North
Seasons	Spring	Summer	Late summer	Autumn	Winter
Hours	Dawn (youth)	Midday	Afternoon	Evening (old age)	Midnight
Climate	Wind	Heat	Humidity	Drought	Cold
Senses	Sight	Taste	Touch	Smell	Hearing
Flavours	Acid (tart)	Bitter	Mild (sweet)	Pungent (hot)	Salty (salted)
Organs	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lungs	Kidneys
Colours	Green/Blue	Red	Yellow	White	Black
Active forces -Spheres of action	Sight	Speech	Gesture	Thought	Listening