

Interview dated 14/02/1996

Laurence Bancaud : During your experience in the world of cinema, how did you deal with the connection between music and image?

Tôn-Thât Tiêt : My aim wasn't to compose music to go with the images, but rather music that would speak to and prolong the emotions. In the foreword to *Preludes to a Dialogue* I wrote that music speaks where words leave off, and we can even say that where music stops, the language of Nature takes over. The film-maker creates an image that evokes an idea which must then be developed, because quite often the image does not translate the whole idea. The picture's means are limited, there must be something that extends them. Music helps to make it possible. But music does not always succeed in expressing everything; the sounds evoke something and after that silence must amplify this. It's a form of meditation. Silence is not silence, it speaks. In the act of meditation we try to make our mind a blank to eliminate all thoughts, all our cares, everything. Once we arrive at that point, something else is expressed. In each one of us there is a fragment of the cosmic spirit, the Buddhist soul. By meditating we can awaken this soul. This enables us to communicate with Nature.

I composed film music for that reason and I told Hung that if that wasn't what he needed, there was no point in asking me to write music for his films, because anyone at all can do that!

Did you see the images before composing the music?

No, I always compose before the shooting of the film. When you see the film, you are always influenced by the images and you cannot go into things more deeply. I read the type-script of the film several times before writing the music and I imagined the images corresponding to the script. Fortunately (as in case of *Cyclo*, which entailed a lot of work) it worked every time! but there's one thing in *Cyclo* that I didn't think of, and that's the noise of the city; that's why certain sequences were less than perfect. Not only did the city noise deaden the music, but city noise and the music were at variance with each other. The noise of the city should have been part of the music element. After seeing the film three times, I can understand why I'm not very pleased with the music. A typical example is when the poet speaks to the cyclo for the first time. At this moment there's a form of friendship between the poet and the cyclo. I created something very tranquil because it represents the undefiled part of the poet, but the noise of the city drowns all that!

What do you think of the research on sound carried out by composers like Giacinto Scelsi, John Cage, or Jean-Claude Eloy after they discovered the Orient?

I must admit that I haven't studied, or even looked closely into the music of these composers. It's difficult for me to say anything precise on the matter. I listen to music as an audience would do, but without any analytical aspect. I compose, but am I a composer like those who have a huge stock of musical knowledge? I really like Scelsi, I'm very close to him. I don't listen to him with my mind, and I don't ask myself why I like him.

Might it not be because of the link to the Orient, that you are so found of, that you like the music, and for this way of handling sound?

Yes, without a doubt Scelsi researched this aspect. For my part, I don't research anything it isn't in my field, it's quite foreign to my nature. The research on the part of others may give me ideas, for example about sound colour. For me, I must insist, music is an outlet, a way to express what I think.

What's important is to write naturally. The research mustn't be visible. In order to be natural, we have to have an idea first and foremost and to only use research with which to express it. If there's no idea behind it is mere emptiness, there's no meaning to it.

Neither Scelsi nor Eloy has the oriental sound colour, nor the philosophical spirit. In order to write there must be a structure. Cage makes use of Y-King as a way of writing, but not as an idea of the works.

You also like Olivier Messiaen, André Jolivet and Maurice Ohana...

Out of the three composers you mention, it is Messiaen's music which touches me most, because of its spiritual content, when he speaks of the celestial city. In his opera, he used the ondes Martenot, very simply, and it was very evocative. I feel very close to Ligeti, too, to his sound world.

How do you feel about the music of Pierre Boulez, or Karlheinz Stockhausen, which is often thought to be 'cerebral'?

Boulez and I have followed different paths. I'm not really comfortable with postwar serial music. I like Boulez for his poetic side. He does write serial music, but it is poetic; the sound colour is rather lovely and softens the cerebral aspect of his music; he has indeed changed considerably, his music has become quite lyrical!

I can't really say that I don't like Stockhausen since I don't reject it, but I'm not always quite at home with it. I do like his works for voice, for example *Song of the Youths*, though sometimes it gets too complicated, like Ferneyhough.

When I was young, I divided the orchestra too much. Now I can see that it needs to be simpler, less cerebral, more near to us. Thus the lyrical aspect is much more important. A composer like Rihm was part of the vanguard innovators, and now he writes in a much more

lyrical vein. I think we need to think about the role music plays. My vision of music is not like that of the postwar years, in the fifties. Music isn't something cerebral. Look at the concert programmes: they often speak of structure, and of the way in which music is composed. But music has never had anything to do with that. Music isn't intellectual. Of course structure is needed in order to compose, but that isn't all. Intelligence doesn't give you the means to compose, you need something else. Intelligence is part of the analytical world, like the world of scientists. But if you listen to American repetitive music, it isn't cerebral, but it's too simplistic; it sounds alright, but after a while you need something else

Is your idea of silence similar to that of Takemitsu, Taïra?

I must admit that I don't know all the works of Takemitsu, and am unable to give you a fair answer. Nor am I close to Taïra. The silence in *Nô* is not the silence of the beginning of *Chu Ky I* or *Chu Ky III*, when listening to this you can see that I don't approach Taïra's conception. Silence speaks. Perhaps the silence of *Niêm* comes closer. In *Nô* there's something very brutal, followed by silence. In *Chu Ky*, the silence is mingled with very quiet notes; the notes conjure up something, the silence extends this. « At the moment when music ceases, Nature must be allowed to speak; and when alone with silence in our innermost being, we can gain the sense of nature (or of the universe) ». It's this silence that I would like to evoke. *Chu Ky* is like Indian music. Near silence there is no violence. In *Nô*, after violence, what can silence speak of? Taïra's music is a typical example of *Nô* (when the instrumentalists cry out). Takemitsu's music is redolent of Debussy. His early works were more personal.

You say that you possess « a notion of time bordering on the oriental » and that your music is situated « in a global rather than a linear time ». Can you extrapolate?

Linear time is real time, past, present and future. Global time is rather « non-time ». If you listen to Indian music, you lose track of time. Thus there is no more time, it becomes « non-time ». Whereas linear time goes on evolving! You must read the Chinese philosopher Tsuang tsu; for him there is neither past nor present. Martine Cadieu speaks of « suspended time ».

Global time may be thought of as visual time. I can « see » time. When one is upon earth, one sees time, but when one departs from the universe, and looks at the universe of all galaxies, then time ceases to exist.

You seem to be getting nearer and nearer to Vietnam, and to your roots. Is this due to your going deeper into your spiritual search concerning Buddhism, or rather a certain longing for an other culture?

Yes, you may well be right, with age there comes a certain nostalgia. I used to believe that I could be here in every sense of the word, and live out my life here quietly, with no regrets. But now the problem is nostalgia. But I cannot go and live there. I went to Vietnam to revisit

my memories and see whether I could live out my life there, but that's all over, there are no more memories. Yet I continue to live with these things; it's difficult for me. Every time I go to Vietnam I look for my memories, but am disappointed because I no longer find the images of my childhood that I held on to. This has to be accepted; everything changes, we change too like the water of a river flows.

I'm very fond of Vietnam, my mother country. After 40 years' absence, I remain Vietnamese in my way of thinking. Do you remember my once saying that the orchestral colour of music is the colour of light in Hué. Unwittingly my music is influenced by the music of Hué (court music) and even by the ca trù (Northern vocal music). I've tried to use the vibrato voice of ca trù in *Image Lointaine II (Distant Image II)* or *Vang bong thoi xua*. For about 10 years now the percussion technique in court music has had a considerable effect on my own way of writing for percussion. I have reduced the number of percussion instruments quite a lot. In my recent works the percussion in the music of Hué can be heard clearly, much more than before. I only use a small number of skin instruments but the percussion section requires considerable playing skills. I often have percussionists listen to the recordings of traditional Vietnamese music so as to give them an idea of the performance necessary.

Do you remember the Hué music concerts at the Maison des Cultures du Monde, in the autumn of 1995, in particular the piece for percussions and oboe (Vietnamese)? It may be because of this mentality (that regarding percussion in traditional Vietnamese music), I'm very fond of jazz (I only speak of percussion in this instance).

I've often used instrumental forms redolent of music over there, namely *Dang Phung Vu* and the two latest works for orchestra. In *Dialogue avec la nature (Dialogue with Nature)*, the orchestra is very simple, as in the work for violin and orchestra.

I've used more and more Buddhist texts as ideas for my music. It's simply how my thought has evolved. Today, in 1996, I'm over sixty. I see life with different eyes, not at all like young people do. Do you see why I've written several ideas in an autumnal frame of mind? *Dialogue with Nature* (2 guitars and orchestra), *Thu Phong* autumn wind (violin and piano), or *Contemplation* (viola and piano).

Formerly, in Asia, people of a certain age lived outside society. At the age of meditation, one thinks about the world, about life, seeing life with more equanimity. I don't know whether I'm wise enough to be able to speak about it, but Buddhism really helps me to be more calm, more serene.

We need to take things less seriously, for example a failure: we need to eliminate worry, desires, many things. If we can do that, it's a good start. Getting to the stage where form is vacuity, and the reverse.

Once, a lady told me she suffered from stress because her work wasn't useful. Everyone on earth is useful, even doing small things is useful; you mustn't say that someone is useless. I'll give an example: you do that, you know, and it's a great help to me, that's being useful. That's where stress comes from, because there are people who want to be important, they are unhappy. All desire must be banished. That's what Buddhism is.

To your mind, what is there after death?

According to Buddhism, life is a sort of link in a chain. After life, something else goes on. In Buddhism it is said that that we sow a grain during our life, and if the grain is good, the result will be good fruit in the next life. It's now that we must lead a good life. If we do, with kindness, we're happy. That's something fine, for a start you mustn't think too far ahead. I don't try to avoid death, I accept it, it's in the nature of things.

In Taoism we find the idea of non-action. Non-action doesn't mean doing nothing, but following the natural movement, rather than going against life's flow.

You ask me what there is after life, according to me; but why should we always try to find out what comes after death? it's more important to learn how to live!