

The composer Tôn-Thất Tiêt has just celebrated his ninetieth birthday!

Laurence Bancaud

I am asked why I live on this blue mount

I give no answer, ut smile - my soul at peace

Peach blossoms, a tranquil spring

This sky, this earth, do they pertain to man?

(Li Po - 8th c.)

As a great composer of landscape and contemporary music, Tôn-Thất Tiêt provides us with a choice of works that have been added to up to the present date, including solos, chamber music, orchestral works, concertos, vocal pieces, operas and film music... one of his best-loved instruments is the harp.

Tôn-Thất Tiêt now lives in Paris with his wife Tâm-Qùy, who translates those Chinese and Vietnamese poets whose words have often been set to music: Li Po, Wang Wei, Han Mac Tô and others.

Tôn-Thất Tiêt's artistic journey and his background

Tôn-Thất Tiêt is of Vietnamese origins and was born in Hué, a town in the center of Vietnam, on October 18, 1933. He spent his childhood and his youth there up to the age of 25 in 1958. He then travelled to France in order to study in Paris. He was admitted to the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris in the composition classes of Jean Rivier and André Jolivet. He also attended lessons conferred by Olivier Messiaen and Nadia Boulanger, and became friends with Henri Dutilleux and Maurice Ohana. He studied atonal techniques and serialism and became interested in writing in sound blocks and orchestral clusters such as those of Krzysztof Penderecki and György Ligeti.

His professors encouraged him to go back to his roots and go deeper into the Oriental philosophies in order to find his own style. Other Asian composers have returned to their traditions while studying in Europe, namely Yoshihisa Taïra who turned towards the Japanese musical tradition after hearing it in Paris and Toshio Hosokawa who first heard the gagaku in Berlin and was encouraged by Klaus Huber.

In this way Tôn-Thất Tiêt creates his own style little by little, swinging between these two dissimilar cultures: Western composing stemming from the post-Weber school of thought, and the colour, and philosophy, as well as the conception of time redolent of the Orient.

Permeated as he is with his country's traditional form of music he writes to the tune of Vietnamese songs and the sounds of Asian instruments such as the zither, the lute, percussions, the fiddle, the oboe, the bamboo flute without necessarily including them in his works as other Asian composers do (Toru Takemitsu writes for the shakuhachi, Nguyen Thien Dao for the dan tranh).

Thus Tôn-Thất Tiêt uses Western writing techniques to express the Asian thoughts and mind-sets.

Hué and the Viet Nam

Hué, the town where Tôn-Thất Tiêt was born, the former imperial capital, is steeped in history and culture and is registered in Unesco's world patrimony. The town is built round the Forbidden City and crossed by the River of Perfumes, so dear to the heart of the Vietnamese people, wending its way between paddy fields and mountains. The valley of the Emperors' tombs, with its real palaces erected for the life beyond stretches along the river banks.

Tôn-Thất Tiêt was brought up within a family of letters, his father was a mandarin, a prominent official at Court. His education was based on the three fundamental pillars of Vietnam: confucianism, taoïsm and Buddhism.

Confucianism comes from Confucius (5th c. BC), the great Chinese philosopher, the very foundation of the social and family institutions in Vietnam and is incarnated in the cult of one's ancestors.

Taoïsm stems from the notion of Tao, the philosophy of Lao Tseu and Tchouang tseu, both of them Chinese (5th/4th c. BC) extolling the notion of living in harmony with nature.

Buddhism, originating in India, around the 6th century BC, was transposed to China from the first century AD onwards, via the silk road, then spreading to the other countries.

Tôn-Thất Tiêt's universe is significantly imbued with all of these currents of thought and will also be influenced by Hinduism, namely in his cycle of works *Chu Ky* (*Chu Ky III* for harp, *Chu Ky VII* for harp and ensemble).

In fact, because of its history and geographical situation, Vietnam has been a crossroads of diverse cultures and influences, such as those of China, India, Indonesia and other neighbouring Asian countries, while developing its own native, specific identity.

"I always speak of Hué, the town where I spent my childhood and youth, most lovingly. My works, and particularly their orchestral colour, are permeated with light, and the colours of this town the music of which has been with me since the cradle.

Imagine a night bathed in moonlight on the River of Perfumes, far from the clamour and lights of the city. Then all at once, in this transparent tranquility, the song of a ferrywoman rises into the air mingling with this world of ghostly lights... This is an image I have kept in my memory since childhood. This deep feeling that binds me to Hué is no doubt a sentimental one, but it is also an irresistible source of strength... (Tôn-Thât Tiêt on the cover of CD *Vietnam/Musique de Hué - Inédit/Maison des cultures du monde*)

Tôn-Thât Tiêt pays homage to Hué in *Images du temps* "Pictures in time" or "pictures of the Imperial City of Hué" (for harp and wind band). *Les Jardins d'autre monde* "The otherworldly gardens" (for harp and ensemble) evokes the valley of the emperors' tombs. Traces of the traditional music of Hué can be heard in his writing and in his inspiration; he also admires the learned music of Northern Vietnam, the Ca Trù (*Poèmes* for flute, viola, harp and Ca Trù ensemble).

Being well-versed in 8th century Chinese poetry, he has set the poems of Li Po (*Poèmes*) to music, as well as Tou Fou (*Kiem Ai* for chorus and orchestra), Wang Wei (*Comme la peinture de Wang Wei* "Like the paintings of Wang Wei", for soprano, clarinet, violin and harp), and also Han Mac Tù (1912-1940), a famous Vietnamese poet (*Balade au clair de lune* "Moonlight walk" for two flutes and two harps).

The score of his chamber music opera, *L'Arbalète magique* "The Magic crossbow" is based on a well-loved Vietnamese folk tale, the legend of Mi Châu and Trong Thuy (for 9 voices, flute, viola, harp and percussions).

Twentieth century history in Vietnam

Tôn-Thât Tiêt's universe is permeated with the vast ancestral Vietnamese culture but also it includes his country's history in the 20th century. As he was born in 1933, he also knew his country under the French protectorate (until 1954) in what was then called Indochina. In the sixties the political context was very tense, varying between civil war and cold war. The war in Vietnam became extremely violent until the fall of Saïgon in 1975 and the first boat people. The atmosphere was unbearably painful and made its marks on several of the composer's works, namely *Tuong Niêm* (for flute, viola and two harps) and *Niêm* (flute in G and harp), composed in 1973 and 1974. "*Niêm is at once a cry and a prayer sent out into a chaotic world. A prayer unrelated to religion, for a more just world in which hatred would be wiped out and Man would live in brotherhood. The sounds either skim the surface or violently strike the silence as if to waken Man's conscience.*" (Tôn-Thât Tiêt)

It is in Paris that Tôn-Thât Tiêt meets his fellow-countryman, the film-maker Tran-Anh Hung, who asks him to write the music for his trilogy on Vietnam: *L'Odeur de la Papaye Verte*, *Cyclo* and *À la Verticale de l'Été* (*The scent of Green Papaya*, *Cyclo*, *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*) - 3 films rooted in the history, culture and society in Vietnam in the 20th century.

The conception of sound and time

When discovering Tôn-Thất Tiêt's music, one needs to be aware of a certain conception of sound. In Vietnam this notion is inseparable from the Vietnamese language which is one of tones (like the Chinese language). The meaning of a word will change according to the inflection of the voice. In this way the sound has a curve, a subtle undulation. Vietnamese music and language are closely linked. Sounds in Oriental music are never "naked", or fixed, but always ornamented as in the Vietnamese language. In this way the composer forces us to go inside the sound by delicately approaching the sound elements, a range of precisely declined shades and a variety of timbres that serve to ornament and colour the sounds. Scores for the harp indicate a form of music which is almost silent, "like a murmur", "far away", "barely touch the strings", "almost soundless", as well as subtle harmony, a gentle paper-like vibration on the strings, with, on the other hand, jerky and dense with violent, metallic hits, percussive sounds, incisive chords. Tôn-Thất Tiêt likes to speak of sound "colours", inviting the player to make certain chords ring out "like bells", and to achieve a "clear", "dry", "deadened" or "luminous" sound, carried out near the soundboard and the pegs with the nails or muffled. Ornamentation can also be made with glissando effects (with the metal key on the strings), with oscillation (vibrating sounds) and scordatura which slightly vary the relative pitch of the degrees. Quarter-tones are mentioned even though the notion of micro-intervals is inexistant in the East. Tôn-Thất Tiêt speaks of "emotional quarter-tones". It is also possible to go from one pitch to another by phrased and expressive sliding of the pedals.

In concentrating on the sound (the repeated G in *Chu Ky III*), being immersed in this sonorous matter while seeking to make it come alive and perceive its vibrations causes us to lose our sense of time, just as listening to a Raga in India may go on for hours. Time is suspended. It is also a spiritual experience, like contemplating a monochrome painting like those of Mark Rothko.

Also the extreme opposition of registers in Tôn-Thất Tiêt's compositions adds a sense of the immenseness of the universe and of Nature.

The linguistic framework : series/raga, 5 elements

Tôn-Thất Tiêt invents his own structural organisation by means of series, that is scales of notes existing in ragas as well as revolving round principal notes which serve as starting points in the musical discourse. These pivotal notes are linked with the theory of the 5 elements in Chinese philosophy, and with the I Ching, "the Book of Changes".

The five elements, Metal, Water, Wood, Fire and Earth, form the foundation of the universe and the Chinese perception of the whole.

A whole system of classification is in opposition to everything that makes up human life and the universe; the elements are associated with seasons, directions, the 5

senses, colours etc... and musical notes in the case of the composer: Metal/G, Water/D, Wood/G, Fire/C and Earth/F.

These 5 elements give rise to new relationships of destruction or domination: Fire destroys Metal, Metal Wood, Wood Earth, Earth Water and Water Fire. Tôn-Thất Tiêt composed a series of pieces specifically regarding the 5 elements (*Jeu des 5 Eléments III* "Play of the Five Elements III" for harp and string trio). However, these 5 elements are involved in all his works together with the appropriate symbolism. For example *Images du temps* "Images of Time" contains the principal notes F and A, which represent "The Eastern Earth", F being associated with the element Earth and A corresponding to the element Wood, to the Eastern direction. This Earth of the East is Hué, the town where he was born whereas he is now settled in Paris.

Likewise the note G running through many of Tôn-Thất Tiêt's scores is particularly symbolic and meaningful for the composer who was born in Vietnam. In fact in this country Hinduism and Buddhism are considered to be philosophies hailing from the West, and in the system of correspondences inherent in I Ching it is the note G which is associated with the West. The G note, a symbol of serenity, is at the heart of the cycle *Chu Ky*, or *Xuan Thu* (for harp).

Another symbolical note pervades Tôn-Thất Tiêt's works: E flat which to his mind conjures up an "unreal colour", "the colour of the soul", as representing Buddhism and meditation. E flat is the central note of *Hoang Dziej* (two harps), of *Sept Pas Lotus* "Seven Lotus Steps" (flute and harp); it is also present in *Thuy Lam Vô* (flute and harp) and is in the introduction to *The endless Murmuring* (cello and harp).

Yin and yang

The notion of yin and yang, at once contrary to and complementing each other, is also fundamental; yin is able to change into yang and vice versa. Nothing is fixed, the elements oppose each other yet interact. Yin/yang, or shade/light, feminine/masculin, stability/movement, silence/sound... *Tranh*, meaning "duel" (dual) illustrates this notion; in this duo, the identity of each harp (lever harp and pedal harp) is quite different from the other, but they exert an influence on each other. Generally speaking, Tôn-Thất Tiêt's compositions often contain this idea, symbolised by the presence of a stable element (regular figures, continuo, pedal chord, repeated note...) round which mobile elements gravitate in seeming improvisation. Then the features of these stable or mobile elements can evolve and blend.

The void and the whole

Tôn-Thất Tiêt's music can be considered from the angle of the one of the most important notions in Asian art: the void and the whole. The whole can be seen in the broad, extremely resonant aggregate at the beginning of *Niêm*, it is the phrase of the flute, the stuff of which becomes louder and louder. The void is the bald, bare-bones writing, the place of silence, both the prolonging of sounds and meditative space allowing the breath (Qi) to circulate and accentuating the sound matter, subtle effects

or blocks of energy. The void is also that part of the universe's mystery inviting us to meditate on what is hidden, that which a word, a paint-brush or a sound cannot express.

(Translation : Lilian and Jean Rossi)

Extract from the catalogue of Tôn-Thât Tiêt, works with harp:

Incarnations structurales (1967) 14'30

flute, cello and harp

First performed: Paris, 1970, by Trio Nordmann

Éditions Jobert

Tuong niêm (1973) 12'30

flute, viola and 2 harps

First performed: Festival Estival de Paris, 1974, by the Trio Debussy and Jacqueline Pierre

Éditions Musicales Transatlantiques

Niêm (1974) 6'30

G flute and harp

First performed: Festival de Gargillesse, 1975, by Jacques Royer and Francis Pierre

Éditions Musicales Transatlantiques

Chu ky III (1977) 11'

harp

First performed: 1977, Festival du Marais, by Francis Pierre

Éditions Jobert

Tranh (1980) 4'15

lever harp et pedal harp

Éditions Musicales Transatlantiques

Jeu des Cinq Éléments III (1984) 17'

string trio and harp

First performed: Radio France, 1985, by Frédérique Cambreling and Trio à Cordes de Paris

Éditions Jobert

Chu ky VII (1986) 21'30

harpe and ensemble

First performed: Centre Pompidou, 1987, by Ensemble Intercontemporain

conducted by: Kent Nagano, solo harp: Marie-Claire Jamet
Éditions Jobert

Les Jardins d'autre monde (1987) 29'

harp et ensemble

First performed: Radio France, 1988, by Ensemble Alternance
conducted by: Luca Pfaff, solo harp: Sylvie Beltrando
Éditions Jobert

Trois Intermezzi (1987) 8'30

bassoon, percussion and harp

Éditions Jobert

The Endless murmuring I (1991) 7'

cello and harp

First performed: Festival de Gargillesse, 1993, by Marc-Didier Thirault and Corinne le
Du
Éditions Jobert

Thuy, lam...vo (1992) 17'

flute and harpe

dedicated to Marie-Claire Jamet and Christian Lardé

First performed: London, 1993, by J. Hall et Hugh Webb
Éditions Billaudot

L'Odeur de la papaye verte (1992)

Music for the film by Tran Anh Hung

Éditions Jobert

The Endless murmuring II (1993) 7'

bassoon and harp

First performed: Festival Akiyoshidai, par Patrick Gallois
Éditions Jobert

Cyclo (1995)

Music for the film by Tran Anh Hung

Éditions Jobert

À la Verticale de l'été (1999)

Music for the film by Tran Anh Hung

Éditions Jobert

La Petite Souris (1999) 3'15

harp (extract from the music of the film *À la Verticale de l'été*)

Éditions Jobert

Images du temps (2001) 18'30

harp and wind band

First performed: Beaugency, 2002, by Gaëlle Thouvenin, Ghislaine Petit-Volta and the Orchestre d'Harmonie de la Région du Centre, conducted by: Philippe Ferro
Éditions Jobert

Poèmes (2004) 13'45

flute, viola, harp and *Ca trù* ensemble (traditional Vietnamese music) on a poem by Li Po

First performed: Paris, 2006, Ensemble Intercontemporain
Éditions Jobert

L'Arbalète magique (2004) 53'

Chamber opera on a libretto by Tam-Quy

based on the Vietnamese legend *Mi Châu – Trong Thuy*

9 voices, flute, viola, harp, percussions and 3 dancers

First performed: Festival Automne en Normandie, 2007, by Ensemble Musicatreize, conducted by : Roland Hayrabédian

Éditions Jobert

published in book-and-record format by Actes Sud, collection *Actes Sud / Musicatreize*

Comme la peinture de Wang Wei (2007) 10'40

soprano, violin, clarinet and harp

on poems by Wang Wei

First performed: Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional de Paris, January 8, 2011, by Alicia Hate, Guillaume Devin, Jean-Marc Volta and Ghislaine Petit-Volta

Editions Jobert/Lemoine

Balade au clair de lune (2009) 17'

2 flutes (with bass flute), 2 harps and narrator

on a poem by Han Mac Tù

Dedicated to Laurence Bancaud and Hélène Breschand

First performed: Rungis, 2010, by Florence Semichon, Franck Masquelier, Hélène Breschand, Laurence Bancaud, and Nadine Béchade

Editions Jobert/Lemoine

Sept Pas Lotus (2010) 7'35

flute and harp (lever harp or pedal harp)

First performed: Paris, MPAA, Auditorium St Germain, January 30, 2011

Éditions Billaudot, Collection Anne Ricquebourg

(2e cycle)

Murmures de Gargillesse (2011)

two cellos and harp

First performed: Gargillesse, April 2011, by Caroline Fauré-Rabot, Millau Fauré and Ghislaine Petit-Volta

Xuan Thu (Printemps Automne) (2011) 8'45

harp

First performed: Clermont-Ferrand, Festival Musiques Démesurées, Maison de la Culture, Salle Boris Vian, november 13, 2014, by Ghislaine Petit-Volta
Édition Billaudot, collection Anne Ricquebourg

Couleur du temps (2012)

clarinet and harp

First performed: Suisse, Genève, Théâtre de l'Espérance, October 5, 2012 by Jean-Marc Volta and Ghislaine Petit-Volta
Billaudot

Hoang Dziej (2013)

2 harps

Dedicated to Laurence Bancaud

First performed: France, Paris, Conservatoire Paul Dukas, Harpes au Présent, April 11, 2015, by Laurence Bancaud and Aurélie Saraf
Éditions IMD, collection Harpa

Hoi Ky (2014)

harp

IMD Diffusion Arpège, collection Ghislaine Petit-Volta

Escapade (2019)

3 harps

First performed: France, Paris, Galerie 19 Paul Fort, March 26, 2024 by Frédérique Cambreling, Elodie Reibaud and Laurence Bancaud

Forêt de Gargillesse (2019)

7 harps

First performed: France, Feignies, Festival Harpe en Avesnois, March 12, 2022, by Frédérique Cambreling, Annie Lavoisier, Ghislaine Petit-Volta, Laurence Bancaud, Anne Ricquebourg, Roberta Brambilla and Alexandra Bidi, conducted by: Fabrice Pierre

IMD Diffusion Arpège, collection Ghislaine Petit-Volta

Discography

Niêm / Jeu des Cinq Éléments III

Les solistes l'Ensemble Intercontemporain REM 311232

L'Odeur de la papaye verte

Les solistes de l'Ensemble Intercontemporain
Milan East 30108-2

À la Verticale de l'été

Bande originale du film
Naïve Y 225096

Chu ky III

Hélène Breschand – harpe
IN SITU IS 190

Les Jardins d'autre monde / Poèmes Sophie Bellanger, harpe

Ensemble Les Temps Modernes, direction: Fabrice Pierre
Hortus 046

L'Arbalète magique

Livre-disque : conte de Tâm Qùy et illustrations de Christos Konstantellos Ensemble
Musicatreize, direction : Roland Hayrabedian
Actes Sud / Musicatreize M13ARBA

Images du temps

Ghislaine Petit-Volta, harpe
Orchestre d'Harmonie de la Région Centre, direction: Philippe Ferro
Klarthe 2015

Incarnations structurales / Chu Ky III / The endless murmuring I / Thúy Lâm Vô

Trio Salzedo
Premiers horizons, 2019. REF.070.173