

INTERVIEW: Clara MAÏDA and Jean-Luc MENET

Jean-Luc MENET: flutist of ALTERNANCE ensemble, Paris (FR)

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English translation: **Clara Maïda**

Jean-Luc Menet: *You assert that "your goal is to mark out in your music the courses of the imaginary inside each and everyone of us"; would you mind explaining your approach?*

Clara Maïda: I try to develop musical structures and processes which work like unconscious psychic processes.

What I am interested in is not the unconscious as a generator of specific images for each individual, the content of dreams or fantasies, with their various scenarios. The capacity of dreams or the Imaginary to distort bodies and time opens a whole field of sound research, but it is rather more the psychic structure that I try to reveal through the musical structure, something beyond figuration, the truth of this intimate architecture free from any representation, this network of complex connections.

There is a kind of course in the sense of tearing off the veil created by images, sound objects which are initially discernible, then disintegrate, gradually shedding their audible carnal envelop. Their components come apart, alter the cohesion of the object, follow independent multiple trajectories, which branch out and off, diverge towards other objects or other force fields and converge again in other areas.

If it was about painting, it would be a pathway from Pollock - entangled undulations, rapid gestures - to Rothko - a pure presence and condensation of colour -, with affective and intensive colouring, and a questioning close to Bacon's, about what allows the identification of a shape, because even though the form may be abstract, it is not devoid of affects, quite the contrary.

J.-L. M.: *What does it bring in your way of treating sounds?*

C. M.: Transferring the activity of the unconscious to musical writing, I work on objects as if they were matter, with its own laws.

Attraction, encounter or contiguity, repulsion, collision and variable density of sound particles. Molecules, conglomerates are formed. Layouts, layers can be heard, but they are pulverized in an endless collapse or flow of matter.

One can think of geology, but is never on steady ground, or of quantum physics and trajectories or distributions of more or less dense dots. One can also think of genetics and of the way DNA is made up and reproduces the genetic material to give a shape. One can also think of meaningful units of language spread in the speech.

The sound material is manipulated and the shapes mutate. The unconscious is constantly active in transforming, destroying, reconstructing, displacing, condensing, combining, etc. elements from personal history, memories, daily life. It is a precarious system, in which subject and object flicker. Sound processes can be imagined from those mechanisms.

We are in a time dimension, therefore everything is in a state of flux. No constituent part of sound is stuck in one place, within the duration of an action, on a set trajectory. And the structure is the articulation of these forces' courses.

Shapes appear because sound quanta have agglutinated in an area, or because in great numbers they ever keep producing micro-movements. The images of a dream take shape because minimal traits bearing a specific significance for the dreamer agglutinate in one character, an object or a situation. They come apart because the separation of these minute elements has disrupted the fleeting assembling which had appeared. In the case of music, we will have, for instance, situations in which a series of pitches gets more density thanks to various rhythmic processes, to the extent of being very compact or polyrhythmic, and then the processes go on, towards rarefaction or homorhythm.

One can imagine these processes for three, four, five layers.

The microscopic modulates the global form. The perceptible whole is matter which undergoes torsions, contractions, dilations, thickens, rarefies, or splits into layers, then into lines.

The timbre gives identification signals of these sound layers' paths and favours the hearing of the gliding of sediments from a layer to the other, or the modifications of density.

But there is a search for an abstraction, the entanglement of lines, rather than thematic or object figures. Sound objects are made recognizable only to make their transformation identifiable.

J. L. M.: *Distortion, ambiguity, uncertain identity : as recurring words when you talk about your music. How do you assess the impact of this point of view upon the instrumental idiom?*

C. M.: I am tempted by limit situations such as those concerning the identity of the sound objects, the possibilities to occupy space, the acoustic capabilities of the instrument, the physical capabilities of the player. I try to push the limits further as far as possible, hence a singular bringing into play of the body.

Search for mutating objects. Search for timbres by combining ways of playing and a complex writing.

If one combines three different modes of playing that follow one another very fast, with an intense dynamic effort, another timbre of the instrument, another sound emerges. We have a composite gesture that induces a complex timbre, because multiple small distortions result from the very difficult rapid series of different modes of playing, from their amplitude, intensity, the energy that the performance requires. Rubbings, parasite noises, small creaking sounds, add up and multiply further if we have the same approach for each instrument. Distortions merge, local residues crisscross for a global enriched sound result.

Blurred identity, ambiguity, hybrid territories. It is an enterprise of destabilization, not a gratuitous one, but in order to question perception.

This approach also leads to reconsider the function of an instrumental gesture which is not written for its own sake, but created within the framework of a space. It is an occupation of space.

In a piece for four instruments, for instance, I delineate a harmonic field a little too broad for so few instruments. Each instrument will have to play certain pitches in distant registers. If a cello, for instance, must play three pitches, bass, treble and high-pitched in very little time and repeat them, so that the harmonic mixed sound should be heard almost immediately and with a certain audible duration, this perceptive demand requires an extreme solution, because the time necessary to go over such a space is not sufficient.

So this extreme situation generates an extreme gesture which produces a specific timbre if the required dynamics are important. The gesture is neither gratuitous, nor decorative. It is the demand to occupy a given space over a limited period. Once this gesture has appeared within the field of writing, one can prioritize it and give it its full place, detached from the context of its appearance. It can become an aesthetic gesture and no longer a functional one, transform (if its components are shifted) or remain functional but change its function (such as revealing an articulation), intertwine with other gestures and form a texture or become a sound object through the coagulation and fixation of the components. If each instrument must meet the same requirement, it induces functional as well as formal plasticity.

J. L. M.: *Does your training as a pianist influence your process as a composer?*

C. M.: It has triggered my first attempts at composition which were very intuitive. Actually, this was written improvisation. The more accurate conceptualization got with specific structural and musical goals, the less necessary the piano became, if not ruled out altogether. Moreover, I work with micro-intervallic scales. *Le livre de trous* is still a rather classical piano piece concerning the timbre, in spite of the stratification of the writing, but my next pieces will certainly be for prepared piano.

J. L. M.: *Your first piece was for electronics. How important is artificial sound in your imaginary?*

C. M.: I consider myself rather as an instrumental composer with sometimes an opening to electronics, which allows sound enrichment. I like the share of intellectual speculation of the writing, the moment when one lets go and takes the risk of letting the processes go their own way. In spite of the preoccupation of a tight control of all parameters, I always tend to seek an area of uncertainty where I will be surprised by myself and by sound. With electronics, one has more sensorial comfort, an immediate feedback of sound. But at the same time, there is this whole sound potentiality and above all, the creation of mutating hybrid sounds, halfway between organic and mechanical, between instrumental and urban ones which I am interested in. Both approaches are complementary to overcome the barrier of the sound "species".

J. L. M.: *How are your compositional outlines elaborated and in what way do they evolve?*

C. M.: Two approaches are juxtaposed. I am permeated with a very kinetic sound imaginary, with inner sound movements, masses, trajectories and their transformation. And at the same time, in another dimension, the writing establishes the processes that will materialize this invisible architecture, the experience of an inner time-space. I set up a harmonic field (complex sound spectra, for instance the multiphonic sound of a clarinet, an urban sound). Then I develop processes to distort this spectrum, with continuous varied micro-interval scales derived from the high-pitched parts of the spectrum and continuously varied, and with superimposed rhythmical processes over various layers in order to form complex moving textures and the polymorphism of matter (pivots, rocking, etc.). The harmonic field spreads to other areas with small modules that rock around an axis and are blown off from an area to the other. The writing is reticular and weaves undulating lines both horizontally and vertically.

Clara Maïda, July 2007