

In search of the meditative flame

by Ivanka Stoïanova

Among his contemporaries, Jean-Claude Eloy is without doubt the typical representative of the nomadic and multicultural composer. Both very French (he is from Normandy, with possible Spanish ancestry) and very cosmopolitan, since his activities as a composer systematically ignore geographical borders ; very modern in the extremely attractive interaction of technology/contemporary music, and very "ancient", since strongly attracted by very old non-european traditions : the music from India, Tibet, Japan...

The works of Jean-Claude Eloy seek to abolish (with all the acoustical and electronical means available to the contemporary composer) the distances within time and space ; they erode and trespass the ancient frontiers between the western tradition (which is not rejected, but entirely integrated) and the non-european musical classical traditions. Perhaps with the ambition of inventing the music of the year 2000 : the musics of the planetary man which will most likely be an extension of the different musical civilisations, mixed together and very much interrelated.

The fact that Eloy is using today traditional musicians (for example Gagaku instrumentalists and Shômyô singers, from Japan) is perfectly rooted in his own history as a composer : even his 1960 production written within the context of the investigations of the post-serial avant-garde, shows particularities in the sound structure which bear the auditive and acoustical marks of some non-european musics...

The reactions of both his professors of composition (Darius Milhaud and Pierre Boulez) to the musical score of "**Etude III**" (1962, for double classical orchestra - like in Beethoven, but with five percussionists) are in some way premonitory : "you are doing Shô's" (mouth organs of the Gagaku music) exclaims Milhaud ; "this is just the continuous pattern of the Shô's", Boulez tells him ; both alluding to the complex continuous texture with very fine internal string ornamentations, abruptly cut by the intervention of the wind instruments : their large sustained crescendoes modify themselves harmonically and form a kind of multicoloured timbre-continuo.

This is also the case in "**Equivalences**" (1963) for eighteen instruments, which integrates (particularly in the second third) structures of similar origin : anamorphosis of "acoustical gestures" (according to the composer's expression). Harmonic blocks or fields of six sounds continuously modify themselves according to the scales of potentiality established upon the number of common sounds in the progression of the chords : unconsciously, Eloy adopts at that time one of the fundamental structural principles of Gagaku music.

"Faisceaux-Diffractlons" (1970) where the 28 instruments are subdivided into three strongly isomorphic orchestras, thus allowing the treatment within space of a same musical substance, develops a similar principle of slow and more or less variable repetition of the harmonic fields, supporting an ever increasing chromatic ornamentation ; synthesis and tensions between the variable and the repetitive ; it seeks to achieve a balance between the proliferation of the writing and the redundant part necessary to convey the information.

The treatment of the sound (orchestral, vocal, electronic), and its projection into the dimension of time (the form) is with Eloy often based on a perfectly directive gesture, also inspired by non-european musics (the principles of the development of Indian Ragas, with their "Alap's" followed by vertiginous virtuoso improvisations).

"Kâmakalâ" (*The Energy Triangle*, 1971, choirs, orchestra, three conductors) is in fact a single long crescendo of texture lasting more than thirty minutes ; a crescendo which affects all dimensions of the organisation of sounds in order to clearly cristallize the absolutely continuous build-up of acoustical energy. This gradual process in the exploration of the ever more complex sound mass leads to a pseudo-quotation ; a very veiled allusion to a piece of the Gagaku repertoire ("Etenraku"), but irrecoznizable, since chromitized, mingled, broken whithin the texture of the three orchestral groups.

The use of the voices - very low voices at the beginning of "Kâmakalâ" reminiscent of the music of the Tibetan monks, or the voices of the Buddhist Shômyô monks in **"A l'approche du feu méditant"** (*Approaching the Meditative Flame*, 1983, production of the National Theatre, Tokyo) also corresponds to the necessity of a planetary opening of vocal techniques, and has strictly nothing to do with the procedures of quotation or collage.

Eloy's fascination with exceptional and unusual sonorous situations is fully obvious in a work like **"Anâhata"** (*Primordial Vibration* or *Original Vibration*, 1986).

The instrumental material used are the wind instruments of Gagaku, but with no reference whatsoever to the usual style of this music (except for the specific nature of these instruments).

The vocal material comes from another tradition; the Shômyô-chanting, revised and tranformed in order to attain a free and written composition (like the first part of "A l'approche du feu méditant", of which the peculiar graphism was a historical premiere).

The electroacoustical aspect - very developed and surrounding the vocal and instrumental interventions - was elaborated with the technological equipment of various European Studios (Amsterdam, Berlin, Geneva, etc...) from generally concrete materials ; Shô-sounds, voices, numerous metallic percussion instruments (Bonshô especially), nature sounds, etc...

To this, one must add the direct use of a vast collection of "complex" percussion instruments from Asia (Thailand, China, Korea, Japan, principally).

"**Anâhata**" thus "reflects" (in interaction and mutual prolongations) very varied universes of sound-textures and different organizational systems of sound-color material ; chromatism ; diatonism ; micro-chromatism of gliding and non-tempered spaces ; percussion noise-sounds and "abstract" electronic sounds ; concrete sound-landscapes... True to his nature, Eloy banishes all univocal quotation in favour of the unifying and formal acoustical gesture, ensuring the transmutation of the timbres in the final product of his nomadic sonorous alchemy...

The works succeed each other sometimes in a truly globalizing complementarity. "**Kâmakalâ**" is conceived like a progressive unfolding of the prime vital force, like the birth of the worlds ; "**Shânti**" ("*Peace*", electroacoustic, 1972-73) is the manifestation of this contradictory energy, in its long metamorphosis through vastness. Conceived like an "eternal return" type of work, "Shânti" can start again on itself but can also stop at the point where a new "Kâmakalâ" starts.

Similarly, "**A l'approche du feu méditant**" and "**Anâhata**" succeed each other according to the logic of movement within the same galaxy. This is a new phase - necessary to the composer's development - in this irresistible, impetuous and fascinating path towards something ineffable, towards the profound truth of the individual which has its ramifications in many civilizations, and which gives us, the listeners, the impression to assist at the celebration of a sacred ritual where time comes to a halt.

In the slow spirals of the "time of the stars", the works of Eloy ignore the limitations of musical pieces intended for the normal duration of concerts, and spread over two, three, or four hours ; like in the electroacoustic fresco "**Gakuno-Michi**" ("*The Ways of Music*", 1977-78), or the four acts of the "imaginary ritual" of "**Yo-In**" ("*Reverberations*", 1980) ; long progression of a solo percussionist through more than a hundred instruments, "embedded" in their electroacoustical reflections/metamorphosis.

In contrast to the homeostatical sound fabrics of the repetitive minimalists, Eloy bases his strategy on the "large maximalist architectures" ; a strategy grounded in the formative principle of contrasts (but at very long distances, by stretched out transformations) ; on a fundamentally dialectical reasoning with the aim of achieving the integration of opposing forces into a coherent total work. Moments of extreme violence and very dense movement of matter are transformed through gradual processes into contemplative, transparent, almost immobile areas, according to a gestual logic of the unfolding of contraries and multiplicities towards their integration in the all-coherent.

The true greatness of this music does not lie in its nomadic elan, or in the multiplicity of the most sophisticated means and techniques, or in the virtuosity of the composer's craft, or in the vast amplitudes of the works, but most of all in its immensely human dimension - dimension which the virtuoso manipulators of computers are lacking so much presently.

The works of Eloy immerse us into the "unique gold" where we re-encounter our phantasmes as adults, children, adolescents, in search of a profound truth ; the search for ourselves within us and within the world. This nomadic, eternal, atemporal and above all fundamentally human dimension constitutes the attractive forces of these "spirals of the same galaxy" in Eloy's music. His music always searches for the "meditative flame" ; "... his meditation is the heart, i.e. the vastness of the world, which enlightens and protects ..." (1).

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(1) Heidegger : "Alêthéia", commentary on Heraclitus (in "Essais et conférences", Gallimard, 1958)