

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL MODELS IN THE PIANO WORKS OF F.-B. MÂCHE

The music of François-Bernard Mâche (which I discovered during my studies in California through a recording by Elisabeth Chojnacka and an article by Marta Grabócz) has made a deep impression on me through the elegance and simplicity of its declared aim: to revive controversy. This essential gesture has served as a guiding principle in my attempt to break out of the limp consensus that has formed around contemporary music, especially in academic circles. To borrow the ironic title of one of his recent works in reference to Monteverdi, I would say that F.-B. Mâche proposes a *terza prattica* whose rules are based on concepts abandoned by both the *prima* and the *seconda*. Such a practice imposes an active critique of the presuppositions at work behind the modes of expression we call classical and modern. His passionate investigation of the world of sound is resolutely not based on historical criteria, but his approach seems to extend and complement a tradition of criticism based on historicism.

Like many musicians who have encountered François-Bernard Mâche's work, I was initially interested in the "naturalistic" side of his expression. His mixed compositions of the 1970s (Korwar, Naluan, Kassandra, Amorgos, etc.) propose a close alliance between the musician's cultural gesture and the raw sound existing in nature I have studied this highly polemical alliance from the perspective of mimesis¹ as well as through the analytical methods proposed by structural anthropology. But as a pianist who wished to perform his compositions, I found myself faced with a corpus that seemed to break with his naturalistic methods and instead proposed a use of cultural models, some even borrowed from Western European practice - what could be more exotic in the context of my knowledge of his music! What's more, even the unification of a piano work seemed highly artificial to me. The piano often provokes irreparable conflicts in composers who choose to compose with sounds rather than notes. F.-B. Mâche claims no particular piano philosophy, and rejects the historical trend that privileges this instrument. Where, then, are these dozen works to be placed in his current catalog of works for the hammered keyboard?

Fortunately for us pianists, F.-B. Mâche has not definitively distanced himself from the "bourgeois" instrument that is the piano, as Edgard Varèse did. However, between his Op. 1 in 1956 (a Duo for violin and piano) and Op. 26 *Temes Nevinbür* (based on a Bartók formation) in 1973, the instrument hardly finds a place outside large ensembles. The piano thus features in fifteen works for six to one hundred and ten performers (cf. Table 1), and only twelve works could be described as "pianistic", given the emphasis placed on the instrument's sonority and technique (cf. Table 2). As far as the latter category is concerned (concertos, solos and works for less than five performers), proud pianists boasting of an immense repertoire will have to admit that it is rather the keyboard in general that seduces F.-B. Mâche. If we look at the total duration of the current catalog, we find the sampler in first place (five works including a concerto, 105 minutes of music), the piano in second place (twelve works, 100 minutes of music), then the harpsichord (eight works including a concerto, 85 minutes of music), and finally the organ (two works, 17 minutes of music).

The piano cycle ²

At the heart of the scattered constellation we have just surveyed lies a "piano cycle" of seven compositions: a variable-geometry arrangement that can be freely recomposed according to theme, duration and character. The core of the cycle is formed by the three compositions evoking the rivers of hell in Greek mythology - Styx, Lèthè and Achéron. But the theme of night could also be included, with Nocturne and Mesarthim, for example. We could also evoke the "natural phenomena observed by Arab scholars", illustrated by the duo Areg (plural of dunes) and Mesarthim (same name in Hebrew and Arabic), and so on.

The tonal "centers of gravity" of each piece also lend themselves to an integral presentation, arranged like a "cycle" of old-time lieder. Thus, the rising B-F sharp in Areg prepares the central tone of Mesarthim (F sharp), whose gentle pulsations continue in the superimposed ninths of Lèthè. The insistence on A in Styx is continued in Nocturne, which ultimately favors the D note. The note D then marks the beginning of Medusa, whose violent, erratic course paves the way for the world of murmur and noise elaborated in Acheron. Other arrangements are also possible, such as "increasing" or "decreasing" cycles in the number of performers (cf. table 3).

Natural and cultural models

The natural models chosen and developed by F.-B. Mâche within the "naturalistic" side of his work are surprising in their supposed position outside the musical field. The cry of a wild pig, to take just one striking example, does not immediately incite an aesthetic elaboration, nor can it claim a historical lineage that would justify a particular application. The use of a cultural model, on the other hand, often implies a well-defined historical conception.

F.-B. Mâche refers to two specifically cultural models in his present work: human languages and myth. Such "genotypes", as he puts it, remain entirely external to any privileged realization in music, and the multiplicity of patterns they can engender is by no means limited. However, when composing for the piano, the musician sometimes finds himself obliged to take into account the traditions and even symbolic particularities that have formed around the instrument. The "transfer to a symbolic exploitation" ³ in the use of a model, which F.-B. Mâche discusses in his book *Musique au singulier*, is thus hampered in the piano domain by a legion of underlying and unacknowledged "phenotypic" models. These models, which could be dismissed as mere historical presuppositions of an instrument steeped in tradition, receive acute critical attention from F.-B. Mâche in his piano production. He extracts and highlights certain presuppositions, transforming them into veritable external counter-models. By examining the way in which F.-B. Mâche responds to certain underlying cultural models in his piano work, I will seek to succinctly identify a historical position through this collection of compositions for an instrument whose historicity seems inescapable.

1 - HISTORICAL SUBJECTIVITY

To understand the specificity of this instrument, we need to summarize its emblematic position in a hegemonic historicist discourse which, in the 19th and 20th centuries, set subjectivity against convention, individual against society. Within this "symbolic exploitation", the tendency is to erect the piano as a metaphor for autonomous subjectivity (due to its ability to assume on its own the totality of

Western musical discourse, without "accompaniment"). To take this aesthetic determination a step further, as Adorno did, the piano and its repertoire would have to be artificially subjected (by metaphorical fidelity) to the crises experienced by human beings in the course of historical and social change.

F.-B. Mâche's response to this over-determination of the instrument is to offer it a position symmetrically opposed to that of autonomous subjectivity. He takes the presupposition as a counter-model. His catalog is astonishing for the absence of original compositions exclusively intended for solo piano ⁴. What he does, so to speak, is to resocialize the piano. Relying on historically rare formations (2 pianos, eight hands; piano and synthesized sounds, piano and percussion, etc.), F.-B. Mâche immediately dismisses the metaphysical isolation that has haunted the instrument from the Romantics to the present day. For him, the piano blossoms in the face of its Other.

Nocturne, a work for a single pianist, unfolds in the shadow of its Doppelgänger - a soundtrack composed of synthesized sounds that merge with the timbre of the instrument. And even if this optional tape is absent from a performance of Nocturne, the pianist will already have used it as a sonic guide to resolve the score's daunting rhythmic complexities (some of which even seem unsolvable without the help of the sound model offered by the recorded sounds). The instrumentalist thus remains accompanied, even if the internalization of a concrete sound path proposed by the external recorded model is concealed. The resulting scheme challenges the performer's autonomy, which is a principle of the piano repertoire. In Nocturne, the need for a guide (coupled with the choice of whether or not to make this guide audible) reveals and criticizes the principle of learning based on the idea of mimesis, a principle that proves universal in the animal kingdom, going beyond the realm of the transmission of human knowledge. The externalization that autonomous subjectivity undergoes in Nocturne elevates this pianistic presupposition to the status of a veritable critical counter-model.

The resocialization of the piano is accompanied by the creation of textures and forms that reflect an aesthetic of multiplicity ⁵. The work *Areg*, for piano four hands, is a perfect example. By conceiving independent repetitive melodic-rhythmic cells for each of the two performers, without seeking to synchronize them, the composer takes advantage of the freedom of several piano subjects to create a texture that is both ordered (the notes are precise, the general direction inexorable) and unpredictable (the order of the notes remains free, rhythmic alignment is avoided, the number of repetitions of each figure is not fixed). The resulting sound evokes the poetry of the desert, with the almost immaterial fineness of sand contributing to the formation of monolithic dunes. In this sound image, the metaphorical relationship of the piano as an autonomous subjectivity is analogously transported into nature: what the individual is to society, the sand is to the dunes.

A similar mass effect is further accentuated in *Lèthè* for two pianos, eight hands. This veritable quartet evokes a kind of "ritual of oblivion" and proposes, through several pianistic schemes, an alternative to the model of historical subjectivity. A terrifying sonic image, that of a river in flood, is produced by the wide range of independent movements made by the four performers, each entering in turn, engaging in a terrifying collective accelerando, right up to the moment when they individually pursue this regain of speed ⁶. The truth of the situation, however, is to be

found in the coda of the piece, where individual subjectivity is exposed in the process of forgetting itself - through a melody that disintegrates on its own ⁷.

2 - CLASSICAL FORMS AND MUSICAL DISCOURSE

The autonomy of the musician in relation to a musical discourse is strongly challenged by the work of F.-B. Mâche, who himself submits to external models in his creative process. As this autonomy remains a pillar of historical piano thought, we can count on a critical attitude on the part of the composer in his work for the instrument. The composition *Sopiana*, a duet for flute and piano (with recorded

Sopiana, a duet for flute and piano (with recorded sounds), attaches itself to the piano domain through its virtuoso playing and the provocative resemblance of its formal structure to the classical forms of the sonata and rondo. If F.-B. Mâche is thus orienting himself towards a cultural model catalogued in the West, he remains concerned to articulate the discourse by means of a natural source, in this case a trio of recorded birds. A comparison with the sonata/rondo form in *Sopiana* could be justified by an analysis that does not distinguish between two tonally defined "themes" (cf. table 4). Admittedly, such a comparison would seem alien to the composer's intention. Yet this heterodox interpretation has the virtue of illustrating the slow process of gradual abstraction, from the imitation of birds, conceived as the "origin" of music ⁸, to the forms revered in the West as the pinnacle of abstract thought, such as the sonata. By inserting an archetypal model as it stands into the mold it is supposed to produce over the centuries, F.-B. Mâche highlights the practice at work in this process of abstraction: namely, the practice of mimesis. It is only our sense of having arrived at the pinnacle of such a process that allows us to savor our alleged autonomy as the ultimate stage in this progress.

In *Sopiana*, the performers play according to the terms of an ancient formal poetics (the Aristotelian one that distinguishes between imitation through action and narrative imitation), but they always follow a formal discourse that refers back to the model animals. By imitating the unfolding of birdsong, the musicians engage in a direct dramatic mimesis; they thus manage to sketch out the sonata form that the models arranged by F.-B. Mâche have already outlined. Instrumental interludes, without soundtrack, are inspired by the rhythms and timbres of batrachian models, models expressly absent from the sound field. The virtual rondo form which, through these batrachian interludes, is interposed between the episodes of a "bird sonata" thus demands of the performers an indirect mode of narration that mutes the mimetic action ⁹. In *Sopiana*, the piano plays the role of sound highlighter, enhancing already apparent features (symmetries, developments, etc.) in a natural discourse. Instead of faithfully translating the historical fluctuations of a human subjectivity into the material/form relationship, as in Adorno's model, F.-B. Mâche's work requires subjective fluctuations on the part of the performers according to a material/form relationship outside history.

3 - THE PHYSICAL INSTRUMENT

The concept of the model, crucial in F.-B. Mâche's aesthetic approach, imposes a concrete starting point for the composer, who never works *ex nihilo*, but rather observes a form, an expression that already exists. Mâche divides his attention between natural and cultural forms, blurring the distinction between the two. In *Styx*,

for example, he composes from a datum that is both natural (a physical reality) and culturally charged with meaning. Each of Styx's six sections derives from a single sound model: the note A in the extremely low register of the keyboard, a sound that belongs uniquely and concretely to the piano. This note demonstrates the radically inharmonic character of an instrument around which the modern harmonic system developed, with its equal temperament and fixed enharmonic equivalents. Played fortissimo on the piano, the lowest note vibrates a spun copper string, accentuating partials far removed from the harmonic series, giving the impression of a completely denatured instrument", F.-B. Mâche plays with the unusual spectral composition of this sound, transcribing its development in time in a number of ways. The increasing inharmony of the sound due to its decomposition is suggested by a range of chords in letter B of the score. At letter C, the composer invents a "spherical" sound whose fundamental seems to slide, leaving the harmonic structure intact. At letter E, an imperceptible descent transforms the A note into a mobile cluster, like volcanic magma. At F, two pianists hammer out a modal melody in the space of a fifth (A-E) in the extreme low register, before revealing the sinister resonance of silently depressed keys. When the original spectral structure returns at the end, blurred by a foreign B-flat and E-flat, the "harmonic" partials seem to have changed universes. An even more striking effect is found in letter C: the composer evokes the beating of dissonant partials by employing staccato chords for each performer in a different tempo.

In Styx, the vast field opened up by the cultural model that generates the discourse (genotype) - that of myth - in no way prevents the composer from making a historical critique of a derived model (phenotype): pianistic harmony. The staging of a sonic reality in conflict with the cultural history of an instrument once again demonstrates the modalities of a critical journey through the piano oeuvre. Styx plunges back into the naturalness of a sound in conflict with the cultural norms of the harmonic system that determined it as a "note". The structural analysis of certain myths leads to the conclusion that myth - neither natural nor cultural - is an attempt to understand the passage from nature to culture. From this point of view, F.-B. Mâche's musical gesture reveals a kind of third object through which Styx resembles a myth.

Conclusion - Hypothesis of a historical position in the piano oeuvre

Although F.-B. Mâche's piano music is less radical in its use of the model than his so-called "naturalist" works, this corpus takes advantage of the relationship of exteriority in an original way. Each work for piano(s) concretely opposes a historically rigid symbolic exploitation to produce a more productive, more fertile counter-model. In so doing, F.-B. Mâche offers a historical critique of an instrument hampered by traditions that cannot claim to be universal.

Having examined a few examples of counter-models and their application in his piano work, we can see how faithful it is to the principal methods illustrated elsewhere in F.-B. Mâche's catalog, even if naturalistic expression is not in the majority. The specificity of the piano as a historical instrument revolves around several symbolic (and physical) constructs that the composer did not choose to ignore, but treated obliquely as counter-models. Through the piano's factitious adequacy with autonomous subjectivity, its privileged relationship with historical forms in the West, and its physical temperament that is both imperfect and foundational, the contradictions at the heart of pianistic expression find an echo in the work of F.-B. Mâche.

Through the piano work, we glimpse a common project between a historical-materialist aesthetic and that of F.-B. Mâche, the project of making historical forces sensitive in the act of composing and the act of listening. Both aesthetics expose a profoundly demystifying project: the historicist approach questions the universality of a particular, socially conditioned expression; F.-B. Mâche's approach questions the creative act in its universal dimension, breaking with the mystification of a *Fiat Lux*!

What F.-B. Mâche seems to reject in the historicist approach is the existence of a musical finality in history, whether in a supposed origin (first appearance of a form or expression) or in the idea of an ultimate and definitive realization yet to come. To explain his position, he recalls the Socratic vocation of *maieutics*¹¹. His creative gaze focuses on the birth of musical expressions (delivered by an artist formerly known as composer) under diverse natural and cultural conditions. To "situate" the piano in his work remains an open question, and we can only hope that this instrument will be the birthplace of many newborn babies.

1 INFANTI, Andrew, *Mimetic Strategies in Three Works by François-Bernard Mâche*, PhD thesis, University of California, San Diego, May 2004.

2 INFANTI, Andrew, "Without Fooling the Bird: Structural Anthropology and the Naturalist Music of F.-B. Mâche", *Perspectives of New Music* (University of Washington), 42, n° 1, Winter 2004, p. 4- 30.

3 François-Bernard MACHE, *Musique au singulier*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2001, p. 129-133.

4 The most recent work, *Medusa*, a virtuoso toccata for solo piano, came into being as a free transcription of a work for Ugarit guitar, and is thus doubled by the shadow of an earlier form.

5 I must mention here the excellent article on the "cycle pianistique" by Geneviève Mathon in *Cahiers du CIREM*(Rouen), n°22-23, 1991-92, p. 65-72.

6 Lèthè, Paris, Durand, 1985, p. 9-11.

7 Ibid, p. 13.

8 Cf. LUCRÈCE, *De Rerum Natura*, V, c. 1379-1381.

9 An earlier work, *Naluan* (1974), uses the same recorded material, but deploys a much more "ritualistic" instrumental treatment than in *Sopiana*'s discursive composition.

10 F.-B. Mâche played a prophetic role in the emergence of so-called "spectral" music in the early 1970s. His work *Le son d'une voix* (1964) is a rigorous transcription of vocal data analyzed by spectrograph. In 1982, composer Tristan Murail examined the spectral richness of the piano's low register in his work *Désintégrations*.

11 François-Bernard MACHE, *Entre l'observatoire et l'atelier*, Paris, Editions Kimé, 1998, p. 192.

Titre	Année	Opus	Nombre d'exécutants	Pianos
<i>Volumes</i>	1960	6	Il + sons enregistrés	2
<i>La peau du silence 1</i>	1962	7a	30	2
<i>Le son d'une voix</i>	1964	11	15	1
<i>La peau du silence II</i>	1966	7b	110	2
<i>La peau du silence III</i>	1970	7c	84	2
<i>Rambaramb</i>	1972	23	96 + sons enregistrés	1
<i>Naluan</i>	1974	27	8-9 + sons enregistrés	1
<i>Lejonc à trois glumes</i>	1974	28	41	1
<i>Kassandra</i>	1977	33	22 + sons enregistrés	2
<i>Amorgos</i>	1979	38	12 + sons enregistrés	1
<i>Andromède</i>	1979	40	91 + chœurs (72 voix)	3
<i>Le printemps du serpent</i>	2001	82a	12	2
<i>L'automne du serpent</i>	2001	82b	12	2
<i>Heol Da!!</i>	2003	88	14 (dont 12 voix mixtes)	2
<i>Chikop</i>	2004	89	7	1

Tableau 1

Titre	Année	Opus	Dispositif	Catégorie
<i>Duo</i>	1956	1	violon, piano	chambre
<i>Temes Nevinbür</i>	1973	26	2 pianos, 2 perc., sons enregistrés	mixte
<i>Areg</i>	1977	34	piano, 4 mains	piano
<i>Sopiana</i>	1980	41	flûte, piano, sons enregistrés	mixte
<i>Nocturne</i>	1981	44	piano et sons enregistrés	mixte
<i>Autonomie</i>	1981	46	piano, 4 mains	pédagogique
<i>Styx</i>	1984	50	2 pianos, 8 mains	piano
<i>Lèthè</i>	1985	52	2 pianos, 8 mains	piano
<i>Mesarthim</i>	1987	58	2 pianos	piano
<i>Brûlis</i>	1999	79	clarinette, violoncelle, piano	chambre
<i>Achéron</i>	2002	85	piano et percussion	piano
<i>Medusa</i>	2005	90	piano seul	transcription

Tableau 2

Le « Cycle pianistique» : dispositions symboliques et tonales

Œuvre	Thèmes, significations	Centres) de gravité tonale
<i>A reg</i>	Le désert, le sable	<i>Si, Fa#</i>
	Pluriel de l'arabe <i>erg</i> (dunes)	
<i>Mesarthim</i>	En arabe et hébreu: le	<i>Fa#</i>
	double - une double étoile	
<i>Lèthè</i>	Mythologie grecque: fleuve	Neuvièmes superposées
	infernale de l'oubli	<i>La</i> (gamme par tons)
<i>Styx</i>	Mythologie grecque: fleuve	<i>La</i>
	de l'enfer (la colère)	
<i>Nocturne</i>	La nuit, le temps	<i>La, Ré</i>
<i>Medusa</i>	Mythologie grecque:	<i>Ré, ?</i>
	gorgone célèbre	
<i>Achéron</i>	Mythologie grecque: fleuve	Sonorités brouillées, bruits
	de l'enfer (les pleurs)	

Tableau 3