# François-Bernard Mâche's 'Sacred' Music

NICOLAS MARTY

Independent researcher and composer (France)
Email: nicodria@hotmail.com

**Drawing on François-Bernard Mâche's writings as well as interviews and analyses by musicologists, this paper tries to describe how his music may be described as 'sacred' music, however devoid of any religious aspects, and what this implies for us as listeners and/or as artists. To Mâche, the sacred is the consideration of a specific relationship to the world as the object and as the subject, as the 'why' and as the 'how' of music. Musical examples from his mixed music and acousmatic music illustrate how Mâche goes from his theories to more practical aspects of his compositional technique and listening behaviours.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The work of François-Bernard Mâche (born 1935) emerges from an upstream reflection on the reason and purpose of music, rather than on a compositional method or a musical content. Perhaps this is to be expected from a multi-talented scholar, a normalien holding degrees in Greek archaeology, classical literature and musicology, and versed in many other fields. While his catalogue of more than 110 works includes a wide variety of musical formations (from soloists to orchestras, from musical theatre to acousmatic music, to mixed music managed either in real time or with a fixed tape), Mâche's philosophical reflections in his numerous writings have revolved around a few major propositions since the 1960s (de Buzon 2018: 41). Beyond the 'third way' mentioned in his *Musique – Mythe – Nature* (Mâche 2015: 15) and beyond his rejection of Schaeffer's experimentation, Boulez's formalism, neo-classicism, the music industry and the *tabula rasa*, this paper will try to better understand François-Bernard Mâche's militant stance and the consequences of this stance in the production and reception of his music.

## 2. THE 'WHY' OF MUSIC

Mâche's sharp criticism of some current listening practices is our first clue. According to him, today, 'everything is done to ensure that music is omnipresent, and the walkman as well as other sound systems gradually lead to indifference in listening' (Mâche in Serrou 2006: 178). Instead of becoming a 'constitutive partner of the musical phenomenon', people see their listening 'blunted by the omnipresence of sound', saturated by an incessant supply that does not meet any demand (Mâche 2018: 90). The widespread use of background music is rather recent: in 1917, Erik Satie composed *Carrelage phonique* and *Tapisserie en fer forgé*, 'furniture music' that he wanted to use as background music, possibly to fill in the awkward silences between friends in restaurants, rather than as works to be listened to carefully (Kim-Cohen 2009: 20). At the time, this was a transgression – the norm was to sit quietly when musicians were playing. But with recording and reproduction of sounds, this idea quickly developed, notably in the United States with Muzak or 'elevator music' (Kim-Cohen 2009: 19). Nowadays, finding a public place where no music can be heard has become exceedingly rare – and in such places, many people put on their headphones, sometimes while chatting with friends. In contrast, Mâche thinks that the value of music lies in the active involvement of listeners not only with what is being listened to but also with the way they dedicate themselves to listening. We can thus easily understand that Mâche's music, just like a substantial amount of so-called 'contemporary' music, is not intended to be listened to while doing something else or to be listened to while distracted.

Mâche's appreciation of Debussy's music provides a second clue to his conception of the very purpose of music. To him, Debussy has not been historically important because of his distinctive use of harmony, but rather because of his 'aesthetics of the moment, [which] breaks with a narrative system based on an individual story .... To narrate the sea, the clouds, the bells through the leaves, meant refusing to narrate oneself' (Mâche 2015: 72). In fact, despite the massive worldwide export of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western scholarly music nowadays, we should not forget everything that existed before, elsewhere, and since. Romanticism focused on the human individual, the hero, engaging listeners emotionally in some kind of narrative – and it is above all to this music that structuralist musical narratology turns to find almost literary narrative forms and relationships (e.g., Grabócz 2009).

In the twentieth century, perhaps due to the development of different trends in psychology and anthropology (Emery 1998), this engagement with narration and its temporality may no longer be so

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pronounced. Something new has emerged: a new look at the world, or rather a new way of looking at the world, of apprehending it. To Mâche, beyond religion, this is where we can find nowadays a 'sacred' quality to music, which he sees most notably in the works of Stravinsky, Varèse and Xenakis, in whose works 'this personal or social dimension [of music] is secondary to the metaphysical dimension of a specific relationship to the world' (Mâche in Serrou 2006: 220). Mâche sees the arrival of electroacoustic music as a first outcome of these changes: 'the irruption of noises that have become available does not only imply the technical problem of "language", it calls into question the very purpose of music itself, the taboo of taboos' (Mâche 2015: 111).

Apart from a few exceptions (such as the lighter work *Répliques* for orchestra and audience in 1969), François-Bernard Mâche too intends to put the relationship to the world in the foreground:

> I believe that what I am doing is a palpable expression of humankind's current search for its place in the universe, which is no longer the place the Bible assigned to it, which was to be the master of creation and to appropriate it to do with it as it wished. I take a kind of acoustic ecology stance, which is not passive like that of a John Cage, but active, voluntarist. (Mâche in Serrou 2006: 204)

Reading Mâche, one quickly realizes that the relationship to the world he talks about has something to do with more or less universal sound 'archetypes': obstinate repetitions, stanzas and choruses exist 'not only in different kinds of music, but also beyond the human species, in animals, proving indirectly that there is a reference to a general structure of imagination' (Mâche in Serrou 2006: 130). Mâche has long criticised ethology for its tendency to categorise bird songs according to strictly behavioural criteria, without paying attention to the more musical variations of a 'same' cry or a 'same' song: 'The term "redundancy" conceals an extraordinary diversity, which would only cease to appear as a waste if music, i.e. aesthetics, were to be recognised as the fundamental feature of a partially autonomous biological function' (Mâche 2015: 135). As for the human species, while being careful not to overlook the plurality of interpretation systems and cultures in order to refute the idea of music as a 'universal language', Mâche notably mentions the universality of responsorial chant, scalar polarity, ostinatos or the synchronicity of gesture and sound when dancing (Mâche 2015: 61, 76).

## 3. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

How do you go about composing music with this kind of background? It is not a question of letting chance play itself out through a discourse inspired by Buddhist philosophies, in the manner of John Cage, especially since the archetypes that Mâche likes are anything but random.

In 2004, Mâche himself described four historical phases in his approach to composition (Mâche 2018: 133–5):

- From 1959 to 1969, he saw himself as revealing or mediating the sounds of nature, without using them explicitly – for instance, at the beginning of *La peau du silence* (1962), for orchestra, the instrumental writing is modelled on the recording of the Pacific Ocean (sea surf, seagulls, the bell of a ringing buoy) – the recording is not there, it is reproduced (Mâche 2015: 197).
- In 1969, with *Rituel d'oubli* for ensemble and tape, he began to include the 'raw object' in his artistic work, making the model heard in parallel with his interpretation of it.
- In 1974, the concept of '*surimpression*' (or '*surmodelage*') emerged with *Naluan* for nine instruments and tape, which was composed entirely from animal sounds and a sort of 'tracing' of the instrumental writing on the unfolding of these sounds (the same tape was used again in *Sopiana* for piano, flute and tape, designed on the same model in 1980).
- Until 1986 with the *Éridan* quartet, the model became increasingly abstract, leaving only a faint trace of the natural world.

Listening to his work, one can say that rather than a linear evolution, Mâche's use of models has become more diversified, resulting in the possibility of evolving from one manner to another within the same work. For instance, *Alcyone* (2016), for piano and recorded bird, combines questions and answers between the bird and the piano, *surimpressions* of piano writing on the birdsong, and more abstract parts as well.

Without rejecting musical figuration, Mâche says he never uses a bird to conjure up 'the forest, the sky, the angels, or whatever', instead assigning it the role of 'one instrumentalist among others' (Mâche in Serrou 2006: 203), which raises very practical questions of composition and performance.

Philippe Lalitte notices that the bird sequences used for *Sopiana*'s tape 'were processed using noise-gate and filtering in order to eliminate parasitic sounds (environmental noises, songs of distant birds, etc.) and to keep only what was relevant to the sound model' (Lalitte 2018: 305). In fact, to Mâche, the birdsong itself is more relevant than the space it comes from, in which it can usually be heard. Once the recording is rid of that space, the song can be integrated into the space of the concert hall to become an instrumentalist. This is where the difficulty for performance comes in: the mix between the tape and the instrumentalists is likely to change completely what can be perceived (Lalitte 2018: 312). Over-mixing

the tape could give the performer the role of analytical commentary on the birdsong; under-mixing it would mean one could hear the birds as a background, more symbolic than musical. The difficulty may thus lie in finding the 'right' balance, allowing the birdsong to 'appear' next to the performers' sounds without seemingly coming from elsewhere, without its loudspeaker/amplified source becoming relevant to listeners.

This diversion from the primary function of loudspeakers is typical: François-Bernard Mâche is much less interested in the virtual space and sound volume allowed by the use of a loudspeaker orchestra than in the musical and formal content.[1] To him, space is rarely a musical parameter in itself, as he explicitly states in 2010 in his commentary on his mixed multiphonic work *Volumes* (1960):

> The frustration of seeing the work published on a mono record (there was no stereo yet) was ultimately a blessing in disguise. It taught me to put into perspective the importance of the tools required: whereas timbres have now become consubstantial to music, space, despite its claim to be a constitutive 'parameter', is often, even in electroacoustic music, only a mere convenience or, at times, a distracting mannerism. But the abundance of sound layers in *Volumes* is much more legible, and takes much more relief, with stereo, than flattened on one or two loudspeakers. (Mâche 2012: 29)

When Mâche uses three-dimensional space, it is therefore more about allowing a better legibility of the polyphony than about showing a specific space. Simply put, in a piece for instruments and tape such as *Sopiana*, the playback of the tape should take place over two speakers installed on stage, at the performers' level, rather than over a larger number of speakers spread out more widely. One could even imagine that the left loudspeaker would be in the centre, and the right loudspeaker closer to the audience on the far right, as long as this allows for a better balance between the sounds of the instruments and those of the tape.

Such a balance is highly dependent on the acoustics of the hall and the disposition of the audience, as well as on the layout and settings of the loudspeakers, as mentioned previously, and also on the instrumental performance. 'Surmodelage', which is quite common in Mâche's work, involves copying the timbres, pitches and rhythms of a natural recorded element in the instrumental writing. In mixed pieces using a fixed tape, the score usually contains a precise notation of what is happening on the tape. In order for the whole thing to work as Mâche wishes, 'the performer must not only synchronize as precisely as possible with the tape, but also adapt his or her playing to the pre-recorded sound patterns' (Lalitte 2018: 305).

With the advent of samplers, synchronisation became less of a problem since it was no longer one-sided (Mâche did not really appreciate working with score following, too prone to technical uncertainties for his taste). Nevertheless, Mâche's rhythmic writing has not become less complex, because its complexity, based on natural models, is meant to allow listeners to 'disengage' from the kind of listening behaviour they can often have towards music, synchronising themselves with its gestures, its accents, its tensions and its releases, in order to make sense of it. As Georges Bériachvili says:

> Music which is not sung or danced at least mentally, music that does not imply tensions and releases because of syntactic predictability, is to be 'watched' with one's ears. Hearing of this type can only be based on 'event-driven' and spatial monitoring, whereby musical time does not readily stick to the rhythms of the human body. This does not mean, however, that music is condemned to total stagnation. It has at its disposal other resources, extrinsic to musical language, that can stimulate time, including rhythm, directional and cyclical processes. (Bériachvili 2020: 149)

This may be the heart of the 'why' of François-Bernard Mâche's music: to encourage listeners towards one way of listening to the time of the world by offering it to be heard in a musical setting. Mâche himself does not explain it this way, but the fact that *Sopiana*'s tape is optional seems to be a hint in this direction: 'there is no dialogue, but synchronicity between the writing of the flute and piano and that of the model, whose absence does not radically change the work' (Mâche 2012: 160–1). Therefore, *Sopiana* for flute, piano and tape is the same work as *Sopiana* for flute and piano. Having heard excerpts without the tape, it seems likely to me that, if one were unfamiliar with Mâche's music, the version for solo instruments would seem a bit dry; but having listened extensively to his works, I sometimes find myself hearing instrumental gestures as birds or insects, even when no tape is heard.

## 4. TO MAKE IT SAY OR TO LET IT SAY

'Astonished' to see rocks on display in Beijing 'which had been adopted as works of art' (Mâche in Serrou 2006: 112), Mâche quoted Leonardo da Vinci in 2015:

> When you look at a wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture of stones, if you have to devise some scene, you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes, beautified with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills in varied arrangement; or again you may see battles and figures in action; or strange faces

[1] For his 12 April 2019 concert at the Institut Culturel Bernard Magrez in Bordeaux, France (http://octandre-asso.org/archives/saison-2018-2019/#jp-carousel-2237, accessed 11 August 2020), Mâche actually chose to provide three frontal stereophonic listening areas along the length of the hall, rather than a more traditional loudspeaker orchestra (distributed around the audience).

> and costumes, and an endless variety of objects, which you can then reduce to complete and well-drawn forms. And these appear on such walls confusedly, like the sound of bells in whose jangle you may find any name or word you choose to imagine. (Leonardo da Vinci, quoted in Mâche 2015: 187)

So we could even go further with *Sopiana*, turning the situation upside down and wondering if a purely acousmatic version is conceivable (provided a few adjustments to the tapeless passages).

After listening at length to Mâche's music (in particular the recent unpublished acousmatic works), I happened to hear gestures of pitch and timbre on public transport that reminded me of it, before realizing that it was three people talking behind me. Mâche himself recognizes the proximity between his music and the world, from the point of view of listening:

> I have indeed toyed with the utopia of entering not into my painting but into my music, that is to say, of considering that I live in a world that can be listened to as music and that, if I manage to listen to it as music, I will no longer need to make music, since I will be living it. But this is pure utopia, because we are not merely there to contemplate the world, but also to act. We must therefore ensure that this action is not solely destructive and that, for example, we can rearrange the world without our action being irreversible. (Mâche in Serrou 2006: 287)

Reading between the lines, we can recognize Mâche's reproach of John Cage's passivity towards the world. Mâche is in fact torn between the two extremes of sound combinatorics ('to make say', with the risk of a 'sclerosing formalism') and submission to the model ('to let say', 'extreme realism [which] proves fatally discouraging in the long run for the musical creator by driving him into silence, either because the obvious beauty of the real model makes any work of art seem hollow, or because it simply makes it superfluous') (Mâche 2015: 211).

In 1960, Mâche coined the term 'phonography' to describe the musical equivalent of the photographic art, in reference to Walter Ruttmann's *Wochenende* (1930), a pictureless movie that tells the story of a German workers' weekend (Mâche 2012: 164). In the late 1960s, Luc Ferrari began his *Presque Rien* series with 'Daybreak at the Seashore', one of his earliest experiences with what he called 'anecdotal music', which can hardly be thought of as a phonography in the most realistic sense, because of Ferrari's constant lies and distortions (Marty 2011). But this is exactly what Mâche was interested in:

> Like photography … phonography allows both the appropriation of the real and its distortion. From simple sound 'framing' to slight modifications or radical manipulations, all degrees are possible. Phonography merges with music on the one hand when the organization of sequences is governed by its laws and not by those of everyday life; and on the other hand when any causal identification becomes secondary or even impossible. The boundary is in any case moving and porous. … Since the sound forms captured in nature almost always evolve very slowly, their artistic use requires the intervention of montage, i.e. of a will in the service of an intention. In a way, it is a question of turning around the Kantian proposition according to which authentic art operates as if it were a creation of nature. Phonography is rather aimed at organizing nature as if it were already the sketch of a work of art. (Mâche 2012: 164–5)

His most radical experiment in this sense is certainly the *Quatre phonographies de l'eau* (1980) series, much of the sound material for which was collected near his home in Greece, in a sea cave that he accessed by carrying his tape recorder on a kayak. 'The sounds you hear in a sea cave are absolutely extraordinary: there are rhythmic ebbs and flows, various clicks, crunches, all of which make up the music that I listen to every year live, when I return to the cave' (Mâche in Serrou 2006: 261–2). Since all this is not to his taste sufficient to form a work, each phonography is the result of editing and mixing, sometimes even going towards ecologically improbable superimpositions or acoustically impossible situations. The overall form is far from being random or insignificant, as shown by the comments associated with each of the movements, which go through a whole day to come back and leave the sea cave the following morning (Mâche 2012: 164–5):

> **Regmin** (Homeric word meaning 'breakers'). A crossing, in the morning. 10′12″
>
> **Ianassa** (the 'purple lady', the name of a Nereid). Thunderstorm and rain in the city during the day. 12′15″
>
> **Proteus** (the 'Old Man of the Sea', guardian of the aquatic monsters). Amphibians and insects at nightfall. 13′55″
>
> **Spéiô** (the 'cave girl', another Nereid). Exit from the bottom of the sea cave by day. 10′47″

Despite the 'installation' nature of this compositional work, which originally came with an exhibition on 'Water' at the Chartreuse in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, there is a semi-narrative aspect to it, a look at the fauna and the elements, without any human presence:

> In short, soundscapes are a way of hearing that is all the more enriching that, through their content, their organisation and their actors, everything seems to favour the search for a new relationship with nature. Several sociologists, philosophers, prehistorians, ecologists, plead today for the need for man to come down from his pedestal, decidedly too shaken in various directions. (Mâche 2018: 177)

This brings us back to the 'why' of music, always focused on the relationship with the world. John Cage looked (more or less) passively at the world,

(almost) preferring to have listeners open their ears to the outside world, rather than to come and listen to works constrained in a concert hall. Luc Ferrari proposed 'anecdotal' music whose (stated) reason was no more profound than the anecdote. R. Murray Schafer or Hildegard Westerkamp, for instance, are more explicitly militant with the notions of soundscape and acoustic ecology.

Positioning Mâche among these different tendencies can be difficult. To use the title of this paper and Mâche's words about Debussy, Varèse or Xenakis, one could describe Mâche himself as a composer of sacred music – unrelated to any established religion, but striving for a particular relationship to the world: the animal world, first of all, from which Mâche drew (and continues to draw) much inspiration, and which is still too often considered to be devoid of culture; then, the world of sound, and the listening behaviour that apprehends it, seeking to perceive the analogies between very varied cultural productions, and even within natural phenomena and unintentional sound emissions. Changing listening has almost become a *leitmotif* of serious music since the middle of the twentieth century, with varying degrees of success (Chouvel 2014). As far as Mâche is concerned, if we can listen to *Sopiana* as we would listen to birds and *Tithon* (1989) as we would listen to cicadas, if we can listen to the sea, fire, hylodes, crickets and birds as we would listen to a work by Mâche, then our relationship to the world is already different and the wager has been successful. And if we need to make an effort and ask ourselves questions to get there, so much the better: music will lose its status as a consumer good, to reaffirm its artistic state.

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