

François-Bernard Mâche and the cabinet of curiosities.

(Broacast 2014)

Hello, I'm Bob Gilmore. Welcome to *Tentative Affinities*, my ongoing series of audio documentaries about composers at work in the twenty-first century. Today I'll be talking about the music of the French composer François-Bernard Mâche.

[music: *Korwar*, opening]

That was the opening of *Korwar* for harpsichord and tape by François-Bernard Mâche, composed in 1972 and performed on that Erato disc by the Polish-born harpsichordist Elisabeth Chojnacka, for whom it was written. It's an extraordinary piece of music, firstly because Mâche bypasses totally the Renaissance and Baroque approach to the instrument and turns it instead into something violent, metallic and percussive; and secondly because he uses such an extraordinary collection of sounds on tape. At the very beginning of the piece you heard the voice of a native speaker of Xhosa, one of the "click" languages of South Africa, with its delightful percussive phoneme that is technically neither a vowel nor a consonant. The text she is reciting is a nationalistic, anti-apartheid poem, though it's fair to say that very few of the listeners to *Korwar* over the years would really have been able to tell that. Mâche first intersperses her voice with a recording of a shama, a sort of magpie, which makes percussive chirps that, together with a harpsichord's staccato clusters and chords played with the strings muted, create a texture in which it becomes at times quite tricky to tell the three highly different sound sources apart. The tape, as you may have heard, later segues abruptly into the sound of frogs, then of starlings, which join the high register of the harpsichord in a bizarre sort of counterpoint. As the piece proceeds, other sounds enter the fray - other types of birds, and at one point the sound of the rain, all of them left in their natural state without any sort of processing.

Other than enjoying the piece's sheer delight as an aural experience, it's fair to ask what sort of logic governed Mâche's choice of sounds as he made *Korwar*. Many of the sounds seem to be linked by a network of *family resemblances*, with certain distinctive features that they share and others that enable us to tell them apart. Mâche himself proposed the concept of "phonography" - a word intentionally related to the term photography, although applied to sounds - which he has described as, quote, "the aptitude of raw sounds to compose the sequences of an 'aural cinema', but a cinema based on 'free association'." Listening to Mâche's music, I often have the sense of a sort of narrative unfolding in sound, but a narrative of the sort that happens in dreams, with strange and unreal connections, and where objects get confused with and blend into one another. Here's a passage from another work, *Maraé*, for percussion ensemble and tape, in which the tape is again a montage of sound elements in their pure, untreated state, this time including sounds of wind, waves, the ebb and flow of the tide, and the crackling of fire. The rhythmic profile of the recorded sounds is sufficiently clear for Mâche to be able to fuse them effectively with the sounds of the unpitched percussion ensemble, which includes instruments like *nacaires* (small drums of Arabic origin), bullroarers, and the crumpling of paper, as well as more

conventional instruments like cymbals. The recordings, as is true in all his works of this type, are not a background soundscape but are an integral part of the musical material.

[music: *Maraé*, excerpt]

That was an extract from *Maraé* from 1974 by François-Bernard Mâche, played by Les Percussions de Strasbourg on an Accord CD of Mâche's percussion works. In works like this, Mâche writes, "unprocessed tape sounds... are coloured by instrumental writing that is essentially a transcription in strict synchronism with its model. The conventional boundary between nature and culture thereby loses much of its importance and sometimes even disappears completely". In this programme I want to explore this aspect of Mâche's work together with other of his concerns, qualities that make him, in my opinion, one of the most original, as well as one of the most underplayed, composers of his brilliant generation.

François-Bernard Mâche was born in Clermont-Ferrand, in the Auvergne region of France's Massif Central. His great-grandfather was a clog-maker who became a luthier; Mâche still possesses a viola made by him more than a hundred years ago. His grandfather was a violinist and composer who studied at the same time as Debussy at the Paris Conservatoire. His father was a cellist and composer, who in the early 1930s was conductor of an amateur orchestra in Clermont-Ferrand; he married one of the violinists in his orchestra, who, in 1935, bore him a son. Mâche himself began to play the piano at the age of five or six. Growing up in wartime France, with a curfew in operation, the absence of cinema and with public cultural activities restricted, the Mâche family home became a place where music-making often continued from morning to night. One of the important non-musical events of his later teenage years was a trip to Greece, a country he fell immediately in love with; Mâche still owns a house there, specially designed for him by his friend Iannis Xenakis. He was shocked on first visiting Athens to find that what he had imagined as a sort of museum suddenly came to life, and that the connection between ancient and modern Greek was stronger than he had imagined. Around that same time he had his first encounter with truly modern music, hearing a radio broadcast of the première of Edgard Varèse's *Déserts*. He came upon the broadcast by chance and found it quite beautiful, believing that the shouts and cries of the disgruntled public were an integral part of the score. The first concerts of contemporary music he attended were those of the Domaine Musical, shortly after his arrival in Paris, where he heard, among other things, the premiere of Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître*. This was followed a little later by hearing, in a German radio broadcast, Xenakis's *Pithoprakta*. Mâche later remarked that "I was impressed by Varèse, Messiaen, by electroacoustic sounds, but it was the encounter with Xenakis that was decisive for me". Hearing Xenakis's early tape work *Diamorphoses*, Mâche recalls saying to a colleague that it was exactly the kind of music he wanted to make himself. In 1958 he joined the GRM (the *Groupe de Recherches Musicales*), a new collective created by the composer Pierre Schaeffer. Mâche recalls that at that time, the "official" avant-garde, as represented by Boulez, considered *musique concrète* to be unimportant, and that he himself chose to work with Schaeffer because he craved the sort of "freedom, imagination and fantasy" that the electronic studio promised. That same year he was admitted to Messiaen's class at the Conservatoire, which was a class in analysis -

Messiaen at that time didn't teach composition. These classes introduced him, among many other things, to Balinese and Tibetan music, as well as to a range of western music previously unknown to him. In these years, alongside his music studies, he also managed to obtain a diploma in Greek archeology.

Following two years of compulsory military service in Algeria he returned to Paris where, in the autumn of 1962, he was briefly placed in charge of the *Groupe de Recherches Musicales*, before a disagreement with Pierre Schaeffer led to a parting of ways. The disagreement was both intellectual and aesthetic. Mâche was less than enthusiastic about Schaeffer's proposed method of *sofège*, as later outlined in his *Traité des objets musicaux*. More importantly, Mâche did not share Schaeffer's insistence that recorded sounds must somehow be manipulated and divested of their function as sound signals before they could be used as musical material. Mâche's view was that, quote, "if I adopt [sounds] it's that I can already hear their music. The need to distort a sound, which Schaeffer often advised, seemed to me completely useless, even harmful". The first work in Mâche's catalogue to integrate recorded sounds with live instruments was *Rituel d'oubli*, [ritual of forgetting], a substantial work for winds, brass, percussion and tape written in 1968. It marks the first extended use of birdsong as a model in his work, a practice he had hitherto avoided because of its inevitable associations with Messiaen. Here, the dynamic fluctuations and rhythms of recordings of a red partridge are used (by means of a vocoder) to modulate other recorded sounds, including - as you'll hear here - sounds from a swimming pool, the noises of street scuffles (some recorded during his military service in Algeria), wind sounds and, to conclude, the sound of *selk'nam*, an almost extinct language from Terre de Feu (at the extreme tip of south America). "Beginning with *Rituel d'oubli*", Mâche says, "I integrated raw sounds and musical composition not as the collision of two worlds but as the integration, or hybridisation, possible between what is given by nature and what is created by man... I did it intuitively, like the collectors around 1620 who placed their stuffed crocodile next to a Rembrandt because both showed the richness of the world". Here is the ending of *Rituel d'oubli*.

[music: *Rituel d'oubli*, extract]

Those were the final minutes of *Rituel d'oubli* by François-Bernard Mâche, from a live recording by Radio France made at their *Perspectives du XXe siècle* festival in 1976. Mâche's remark about his intuitive way of working, placing sounds next to one another in the manner of Renaissance collectors, shows him to be a very different type of composer from those who, after World War II, looked increasingly to scientific models, especially mathematical ones, to organise their music. His ideas found verbal expression in his book *Music, Myth and Nature*, an elaboration of material in the Doctoral thesis he completed at the Université de Paris in 1980. The ideas expressed in the book show a divergence in thought with his close friend (and thesis advisor) Iannis Xenakis, who, Mâche recalls, was "extremely perturbed" by them. Although critical of the two-dimensional thinking of serial music, say, Xenakis still adhered nonetheless to a similar principle, believing that music is made from very profound laws that can be described mathematically. He could therefore not share Mâche's conviction that there was a natural dimension to music, beyond conscious control. Mâche commented that "the connection I have

with nature as a model can be seen to have a certain heritage, perhaps not quite alchemical... but at least baroque, in the sense of an aesthetic that was dominant between about 1580 and 1640, the shipwreck of the Renaissance". He further remarks that "the interest of that era is precisely the deliberate confusion between art objects and real objects, which you see incarnate in the phenomenon of the cabinet of curiosities, which has a bad name today, being seen as a naïve, primitive form of the museum, a disorganised form of thought. But that's not the case. It is built on a different sort of organisation, based on symbolic criteria rather than those of current museology".

The metaphor of the cabinet of curiosities is a possible way of thinking of the materials used in many of Mâche's compositions, including those I've played until now and the one I want to play next, *Kassandra*. The "cabinet of curiosities" originally meant a whole room rather than a piece of furniture, this latter sense only emerging in the seventeenth century. It was a collection of wonders, with an assortment of objects that belong to what today are considered discrete categories (though with overlaps): natural history, archaeology, works of art, religious relics, antiquities, automata; they were full of (fake) mythical creatures or parts thereof, exotic substances such as amber, precious stones, and much else. In Mâche's case, the contents of his "cabinets" are of course sonic in nature: some of the sounds may be considered as exotic as the shells and gem-stones of the seventeenth-century cabinets. But it is the nature of their juxtaposition that is interesting. I'll play now two extracts from *Kassandra* for ensemble and tape, completed in 1977, which I think is one of his finest works. First, you may remember Mâche's comment I quoted earlier that his sounds "compose the sequences of an 'aural cinema', but a cinema based on 'free association'". The beginning of *Kassandra* demonstrates this clearly. It is as though our ear is operating like a movie camera, travelling around a landscape. But as so often in film, there is a certain amount of trickery going on. The piece begins with a recording of a peal of thunder (a storm recorded in Île-de-France), with the sound of heavy rain in its wake. A second peal soon follows, after which the sound of a busy stream (recorded in Bretagne) emerges out of the sound of the rain, the two sonorities being initially indistinguishable but becoming clearly. A third peal of thunder, longer this time, leads to sounds of frogs and very high-pitched insects (recorded in Java). The sound of the stream fades out just before the first entrance of the instrumental ensemble, which takes its cue from the pitches produced by the insects - somewhere between a very high D and an Eb - and Mâche has the oboe and cor anglais double these an octave and two octaves lower.

[music: *Kassandra*, extract 1]

That was the beginning of Mâche's *Kassandra*. Now I want to play a longer sequence from later in the work, which demonstrates the "cabinet of curiosities" idea rather well. Here, we hear a merger of sound images from various sources: first, two Indian shenais, their raucous timbre cutting across the instrumental ensemble; then an ensemble passage on a rising chordal glissando, followed by the recorded sound of two *maqrunahs*, Moroccan clarinet-type instruments playing very rapid scalic passages. Mixed into their manic interplay is perhaps the most striking instrument-insect combination in all music, what Mâche describes as the "formal

analogy" between the "nasal twang of reeds and the buzzing of bees". The *maqrunahs* stop as suddenly as they began and we are left with the noisy buzzing insects, at times sounding as though they are bashing against the microphone (or - worse - about to break through the speakers and enter the room). They are then joined by a quiet regular movement on clarinet and bass clarinet, overlaid by recordings of two baritone rackets, the Renaissance double-reed instrument, and later by two bass crumhorns. After a while only the crumhorns remain, and are joined by a tape of two male voices, speaking different languages: one in the Ethiopian Amharic language and the other in Tibetan. Mâche observes that this results in a "juxtaposition... symbolising peace and war: the peaceful Tibetan and the Amharic heroic praise preparing an attack". Musically, it also results in the superimposition of different tempi, creating a dizzy rhythm, rather like people running more or less alongside one another, not quite in synch.

[music: *Kassandra*, excerpt 2]

That was the astonishing music of *Kassandra* by François-Bernard Mâche, performed by the Ensemble du Novel Orchestra Philharmonique conducted by Boris de Vinogradow, on a Musidisc portrait CD of Mâche's music.

The interest in natural languages, as heard there and in several of the other extracts I've played, is a constant in Mâche's output. In general it takes the form of a fascination with relatively obscure languages - obscure from a western European point of view, that is - and also with nearly extinct or dead languages. But in the majority of his works these language segments are present as recordings, rather than being spoken live. Moreover, Mâche admits that for many years he found it impossible to think about setting a text to music, as a song composer would. This had changed by the end of the 1980s thanks to his encounter with the French ensemble Accroche Note and its brilliant soprano Françoise Kubler. In 1983 Mâche had been appointed Professor of Musicology at the Université de Strasbourg II, where he remained for some ten years, but his association with the Strasbourg-based Accroche Note, happily, has continued from that time to this. One of the several works he composed for them is a song-cycle, *Kengir*, written in 1991 for soprano and sampling keyboard (which was also the first work of Mâche's that I myself ever heard). It is a setting of love poems in a dead language, Sumerian, the language of the ancient civilization of Sumer in southern Mesopotamia, modern-day southern Iraq. The piece's title, *Kengir*, is what the Sumerians called themselves in their language, which was probably the first ever to be written; and the texts Mâche sets are the first known love poems. Here is the fourth song of the cycle, *Kubatum*, which uses a five-tone mode in equal steps, similar to the Indonesian mode *slendro*, but used very differently. In *Kengir* you might say that Mâche is forging a kind of imaginary archeology, with music that is doubtless rather different to anything the Sumerians would have known, but that nonetheless transports us to a very beautiful unknown world.

[music: *Kubatum* from *Kengir*, complete]

That was *Kubatum*, the fourth song from *Kengir* by François-Bernard Mâche, performed by two

members of ensemble Accroche Note: Françoise Kubler, soprano, and Michèle Renoul, sampling keyboard. In the 1990s Mâche frequently turned to the sampling keyboard as a more versatile replacement for the medium of reel-to-reel tape which he had used at the outset of his career. In Strasbourg he taught classes in the application of the new computer technology to music, persuading the university to buy a UPIC machine, a sort of computer drawing system devised by Iannis Xenakis that allowed the shapes of waveforms and volume envelopes to be drawn on a tablet and to be mapped to musical parameters. Mâche's own use of the machine was however almost the opposite of that envisaged by Xenakis, using it primarily to analyse and make a visual representation of sound samples before using them for sound synthesis. Around the same time Mâche began to make extensive use of sampling keyboards, which, he remarked, "give back to performers the freedom of tempo that magnetic tape deprived them of". Perhaps the most ambitious use he has made of these instruments is in *L'Estuaire du temps*, a sort of concerto for sampling keyboard and orchestra from 1993. He has described the piece as "the meeting of a narrative form - the course of a river - with the immutable depths of the ocean". Here is the first of its three linked movements; beginning with the sounds of surf breaking, the music presents in a new way sounds familiar from Mâche's sonic vocabulary: the sounds of wind, of rare instruments, and of human languages (here used sometimes in a kind of repeated stammering, not a million miles away from the similar technique used in hip-hop).

[music: *L'estuaire du temps*, mov.1]

That was the first movement of *L'estuaire du temps* by François-Bernard Mâche, performed by Michaël Levinas, sampling keyboard, with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France conducted by Elgar Howarth. That's on the French label Densité 21 (Density 21).

To end with, I'd like to play a more recent work of Mâche, one that again exemplifies his deep interest in Greek mythology. *Perseus*, for soprano, harpsichord, percussion and strings, is another work composed for the remarkable voice of Françoise Kubler, in 2007. It sets to music an ancient Greek poem by Simonides of Ceos that treats with what Mâche says is one of his favourite myths: Danaë, daughter of King Acrisius of Argos and his wife Queen Eurydice, is thrown into the sea in a wooden chest accompanied by her new-born son Perseus. She sings a berceuse. The sea is calmed by Poseidon, and at the request of Zeus, Perseus's father, the pair survive. Thank you for listening to *Tentative Affinities*: we end this programme with a live performance from 2009 by soprano Françoise Kubler and the ensemble La Follia of the premiere of *Perseus* by François-Bernard Mâche.

[music: *Perseus*, complete]