

Instants-Passages

for soprano, clarinet, cello and percussion

(adapted from excerpts from *L'infini turbulent*¹ by Henri Michaux)

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(Françoise ATLAN, soprano; Magali RUBIO, clarinet; Bernard AMRANI, cello and Frédéric DAUMAS, percussion).

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For a few years, my compositional research has been an attempt to articulate the musical discourse with the image of unconscious psychic processes. The work outlines a moving network of plural sound objects which are never fixed or completed but metamorphosing, fissuring, combining one with another to give rise to composite textures, temporarily setting up montages, unsteady compositions through their endless activity of transformation.

The framework of the piece would come apart if the irrepressible energy which runs through it did not bring in insistent lines of forces between the fragments, persistences which make them echo one another.

During the composition of the piece *Instants-passages*, I was imbued with the recent reading of three psycho-analytical works, *L'espace imaginaire (The imaginary space)* and *Le corps, l'espace et le temps (The body, time and space)* by Sami-Ali², as well as *L'oeuvre du temps en psychanalyse (The work of time in psycho-analysis)* by Sylvie Le Poulichet³.

The relation between Henri Michaux's mescaline experiments and the imaginary time-space described by the two psychoanalysts (whose most obvious representative remains the dream functioning process) became immediately obvious.

I thus chose to apprehend Henri Michaux's text through psychoanalytical research focused on the functioning of the unconscious (and not exclusively on its content).

Besides (I will come back to it further), the linguistic approach has also been invaluable.

In dreams, the psychic detachment in which the dreamer is placed towards the outside world, starts a body life-experience which destroys the distance between the subject and space. Body boundaries are abolished, the opposition inside-outside is destroyed and there is an absolute coincidence between the subject and the space of the dream. "A double projection of the subject establishes a relation of mutual inclusion, such as the subject finds himself inside of himself, in a space which is himself."⁴

¹ Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1964, 235 P. Two excerpts chosen: p.11 et pp. 75-76).

² Sami-Ali, *L'espace imaginaire*, Paris, Gallimard, Tel, 1974, 264 p. Sami-Ali, *Le corps, l'espace et le temps*, Paris, Dunod, 1990, 148 p.

³ Sylvie Le Poulichet, *L'oeuvre du temps en psychanalyse*, Paris, Payot et Rivages, 1994, 233 p.

⁴ Sami-Ali, *Le corps, l'espace et le temps*, p. 96.

The space of dream becomes an unlimited body space which can indefinitely spread or, on the contrary, dwindle into a tiny dot. In this non-permanence, the subject splits up, is atomized in the figures which come across his dream. "*The dreamer himself finds himself identified in the field of the dream to those objects that look at him and constitute him since there is no longer any gap between what is seen and the point from where it is seen.*"⁵

The subject disintegrates, scattered into the images of the content of the dream, simultaneously taking place in several vantage points. (The existence of a unique perspective, of a centre from which the Ego would watch the visible, is completely destroyed in dreams).

This experience of dream can be related to the condition of the subject under the influence of mescaline. Any sensation of body and psychic unity is lost (besides, it is a constant in Michaux's work, enhanced here by drug-taking). No more global form, perceived totality but a multitude of fragments of objects, of molecules into which the Ego is absorbed.

In the two selected excerpts, the process begins in a complete dissolution of the identity of the visible figures, connecting here Michaux's experiment with the schizophrenic process described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: "*There is a schizophrenic experience of intensive quantities in the pure state (...) a feeling of intense passage, states of pure and raw intensity, devoid of their figure and their shape.*"⁶

The dissemination of the subject into the objects of the dream would go on with the disintegration into particles of the subject-object complex, like a plunge into the heart of matter such as it is described in modern physics, reminding here of the schizophrenic life-experience once again: "*he who was settling down at this unbearable point where the psyche touches matter and lives and consumes every bit of its intensity.*"⁷

Selection of both excerpts

This choice was motivated by the relation binding them. For both, the visible starting point is a perception (visual in the case of the first excerpt, auditory in the case of the second one), but an obvious ambiguity immediately appears.

Is it really a perception or a projection of the psychic mechanisms disrupted by mescaline which is described in those pages? Does what Michaux observes react to his mode of mental activity, "*the turbulence of air and dust*"⁸ inducing a collapse of his cerebral faculties, or does the disintegration of the state of consciousness generated by the drug contaminate any perception of the objects surrounding him, making them burst into the "dust of objects" ("poussières")?

Would he become what he sees or would he see what he becomes, the distance between subject and object being abolished here until it leads to an atomization, a disappearance of the Ego? (not "I" but "*one is in*", "*there is*"). He is absorbed by what he is seeing or hearing, he totally coincides with the visible or the audible which fascinates him, but this fascination takes place only because the fragmentation process is already in progress. A sort of infinite *feedback* is carried out. Being pulverized, he pulverizes what he perceives and this pulverized perception emphasizes still more the pulverization of identity, and thus until the subject, objects, space, time are annihilated. Only non-directional, non-located particles from where any subject is absent remain.

On a musical level, how to convey this instant when consciousness reels, starting a whole series of disruptions to come?

It is all about generating an auditory shock (hence the violent and brutal start of the piece), in order to trigger a tipping effect and an adherence without the possibility of keeping a distance from sound. It results in a particular listening mode. The listener will memorize this shock, in a kind of concentration area, at a focalization point which, not only immediately opens a temporal

⁵ Sylvie Le Poulichet, *L'oeuvre du temps en psychanalyse*, p. 64.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe, capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Paris, Minuit, 493 p., p. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸ Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent*, p. 11.

gap (time seems to have swept into the violence of the sound impact), but also leaves its imprint on the music that follows.

I will come back further to the musical material of the piece as such by describing more specifically the main approaches considered during the composition.

Selection of the title of the piece

The selection of the title *Instants-Passages* refers to the observations concerning the functioning of the unconscious made by the psychoanalysts mentioned above.

According to Sami-Ali, "*The time of dream is always the present, an absolute present which creates itself at each instant of the same dream and which merges with the presence.*"⁹, a series of images of one presence everywhere in time.

According to Sylvie Le Poulichet, in the unconscious, "*there is no direction, there is only some passage which persists*"¹⁰, a self-engendering activity, in permanent flux, in which the connections, the passages between the figures are more meaningful than the figures themselves.

I have condensed both approaches as well as the reiterated use of both words by Michaux in both excerpts ("*passages*" in the first excerpt, "*instants*" in the second one) in a title *Instants-Passages*, a kind of composite object already made up for the listener even before the work can be heard.

Linguistic approach

My first way to approach the text, once I was permeated with its semantic content, was to proceed with its phonetic transcription in order to have a more precise idea of the phonemes, the most recurrent sonorities. A twofold operation consists in counting how many times each phoneme is repeated, then in assessing the relations of these phonemes with one another, their trajectory within the sentence so as to extract the flux linked to their utterance by the vocal apparatus (closing, opening of the mouth, type and place of articulation).

The place where sounds are formed remind me of the hypnagogic experiences described by some subjects. The individual sees himself living within a constantly mutating space, which, at the same time, represents the inside of the mouth as if the subject was in a space which was inside himself (one recognizes the relation of mutual inclusion previously described by Sami-Ali).

In order to find again the coincidence between the sound space and the space of the mouth cavity, it is all about composing musical paths echoing the trajectories of the phonemes in the text.

In the first excerpt for example, labial occlusions (*p*), of aperture 0 are disseminated across the text. Besides, a large number of apico-dental occlusives (*d, t*, aperture 0) is followed by the increasing presence of muffled sibilant (*s*) and palato-alveolar fricatives (*ch, j*, aperture 1, therefore slightly larger), evocation of a path which undergoes a slight dilation while, at the same time, the vibrant consonant *r* (wider aperture), very frequent at the beginning of the excerpt, becomes rarer in the middle and reappears at the end in a movement which contrasts with the previous one.

Besides, the alternations of open and closed vowels evoke an endless movement: "*passages d'images*": *a i a* (open/closed/open), "*passages d'idées*": *a i é* (open/ closed/slightly less closed), "*passages d'envies*": *a en i* (open/open/closed).

At the end of the excerpt, this opening/ closing/opening process is condensed in the word "*agité*" (*a i é*).

(It goes without saying that the phonemes considered are those that are the most represented in the selected excerpt (26 dental occlusives, 15 labial occlusives, 17 palato-alveolar fricatives

⁹ Sami-Ali, *Le corps, l'espace et le temps*, p. 100.

¹⁰ Sylvie Le Poulichet, *L'oeuvre du temps en psychanalyse*, p. 64.

and 22 muffled sibilant consonants, 35 closed vowels (*i* and *é*), 42 open vowels (*a* and *en*), the other phonemes being not represented in significant numbers).

This observation allows to highlight a polyphony of sometimes contradictory paths, micro-movements, contracting here, dilating there, creating zones of condensation or the emptiness within the fabric of the text, triggering torsions which strengthen its semantic content ("*agité*"), and are precious clues for the composition.

On a strictly musical level, how can one trace these passages of energy, these tensions which seem to be distorting verbal matter?

I opted for developing a drifting, disorganised, poly-directional and fluctuating musical matter. It submerges the listener with an increasing flow of sound excitations, creating thus an uncertainty in listening. The energy flowing, cuts through the texture, allowing micro-formulae which are instantly absorbed by this huge flow carrying and swallowing everything on its way, even its own residues.

This instability of globality is also to be found in the musical objects themselves, sorts of micro-structures of a reeling nature (glissandi, crescendo sound complex/blaring sound/silence, swaying movement between two timbres alternately presented, etc.).

In the second excerpt, the predominance of phonemes presenting an opposite aperture degree reappears, more particularly perceptible on the vowels level (48 closed vowels, 48 open vowels). Within each sentence, each path goes from closing to opening ("*il y a une ampleur*": *i a an eu*, slight fluctuations on the aperture level, always in a movement of utterance which comes round to itself to lead every time to more widening, the same sentence being more and more developed).

Thus here, the rhythm is different from the one observed in the first excerpt, but I will come to this field further.

As for the consonants (they are nearly all represented, except the palato-alveolar fricatives), numerous fluctuations ranging from aperture 0 to aperture 3 redraw an extreme mobility (especially in the second part of this excerpt), still enhanced by the rhythm of the sentences which gradually accelerates (with a transition from long sentences to shorter ones this time), then to repeated three syllable formulae ("*qui se forme, s'achève, s'effondre*").

Rhythmical approach

Beyond their semantic and phonological relation, the two excerpts have different spatio-temporal tempos and rhythms.

The first excerpt can be described as fast, abrupt, poly-directional. As I said above, it has generated an extremely mobile sound matter, undergoing vibrations, oscillations, distortions, surges, sudden stops then repeats.

The instrumental writing will convey this agitation by means of several processes (an absence of melodic stability, the melodic textures oscillating around a few close pitches, a harmony crossed with micro-glidings suggesting unsteady geological strata).

The second excerpt works according to a circular way (with kinds of wider and wider concentric circles, short sentences then more and more longer, built on the model: "*il y a une ampleur*", the word "*ampleur*" being developed through a series of more and more numerous ornamentations.

Here, the texture gets more fragile, only the voice unfolds in melismatic writing, with micro-intervallic embroideries. It is accompanied only by sounds of the vibraphone played with a double bass bow (very pure and fine sounds) and the rumble *ppp* of the Chinese tam-tam which enhances this increasing depth of space. The very deep resonance of the tam-tam leads to a sort of temporal suspension in which only a few harmonics echo (a feeling of almost hypnotic psychic vacuum induced by the repetition of the word « *ampleur* » and evoking Deleuze and Guattari

here again: "the subject is spreading around the circumference of the circle whose centre has been deserted." ¹¹).

An inversion of the flow appears in the second part. An acceleration process builds up through the repetition of certain words (this process was already used in the first excerpt in which the disposition of the reiterations of the word « passages » was underlining the increasing perturbation already perceptible in the increasingly halting fragments of sentences). Here, the words "instant" and "suivant" insistently come round, the repeated formulae such as "qui se fait, qui se forme, qui s'achève", in spite of slight variations, end up giving the illusion of an eternal resumption of the same moment, the same phonemes being disseminated in different words, of eternally starting again the same instant which could be the "catastrophic instant" that Sylvie Le Poulichet evokes: "the catastrophic instant would be this temporal mode in which the ego is reduced to the tip of the instant, endlessly moving to the tip of another instant which is the same and yet different : denuded, uninhabitable time (...) for at each passage from instant to instant - to which the ego and time are thus reduced - an abyss seems to be yawning where the ego might really disappear." ¹²

The play upon iterative sonorities, the ternary time morphology of these almost similar formulae end up producing at first a more and more scanned rhythm, on the phonemes *k*, *s*, *f*, by the soprano and the performers, as if it was detached from the text from which it is derived, then independently from the voice which was uttering it, played by the percussion in an increasingly bewitching development and leading up to silence, in a kind of self-absorption sound process.

Pulverization of the subject giving birth to a pulverization of the sound

The treatment of the voice, its location in the musical matter, are the reflections of psychic disruptions. It will oscillate between a presence relatively detached from the instrumental texture (the token of a subject of utterance, shaken as he may be in his innermost structures, but still able to describe the experience he has been through), and a loss of identity which pulverizes and hurls it into the heart of the fabric woven by the various instruments. It then becomes dispossessed of its semantic content, a pure sound material. Demultiplied into several voices (the performers whisper some words of the text: "agitation", "turbulence"), it also undergoes an atomization of the words which it utters, some of them may be lengthened by stretching a consonant which follows an independent path ("agitation" → *sss*, "feu" → *fff*).

At with Michaux's processes (phonemes of a word scattered in other words : "passages" → "images" → "haché" → "agité"), the voice gets split, manifold, and simultaneously exists in several places (for instance, the word "agité" is vocalized by the soprano : *a i é a i é* ..., while the percussion player utters the syllables "gi-té").

The outcome is a greater depth of sound field. Echoing effects, reverberations, dislocations, are induced by this explosion of the verbal material. Moreover, this one mutes into musical material. Consonants become noise, but instrumental sound too (thus, on the sound level, *f* can be associated to the rubbing of a metal stick on the surface of the Chinese tam-tam, *s* gets lengthened through the rattle of a maracas), still adding to the confusion of identity.

Further remarks

Apart from my work on the text as such, I have chosen to use Henri Michaux's drawings ¹³ as well as his graphics under the influence of mescaline ¹⁴.

The poetical but also plastic and graphic materials have thus determined the choice of the musical writing described above (trills, glissandi, oscillating melodic textures, melismatic writing, rapidity of the flow, mobility, luxuriance of sound but a musical fabric torn apart, are its main features).

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe, capitalisme et schizophrénie*, p. 28.

¹² Sylvie Le Poulichet, *L'oeuvre du temps en psychanalyse*, p. 121.

¹³ Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent*, dessins inclus entre les p. 48-49.

¹⁴ Henri Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, 195 p., pp. 54-55, 86-87 et 120-121.

On the other hand, the fragmented form of the piece, a series of states of extreme tension whose most common outcome is a fracture leading to silence, refers to the globality of *L'infini turbulent*, series of broken visions, which do not systematically include links with one another, leaving spatio-temporal blanks (the blank of the page, suspension points), sorts of gaping holes in the flesh of the work.

Besides, the last part of *Instants-Passages* builds up around the words written in the margin of the first selected excerpt, in a kind of repetitive structure playing at the same time on the words themselves but also on certain syllables ("a-a-agité", "tu-tu-turbulence"), an attempt of clearing a space in the margin, but also resonance, the residue of all that has preceded.

Conclusion

Thus, the compositional work has built up around two poles: on the one hand, the analytical work bearing specifically on both excerpts as described above, and on the other hand, the parallel reading of other works by Henri Michaux, in order to be permeated with his poetic world, thus favouring a whole unconscious approach, also likely to orientate composition.

After using *L'infini turbulent*, it was highly tempting to pursue a deeper investigation of the author's work.

From this wish originates the decision to approach the poem *Iniji*, an extract from *Moments, traversées du temps*¹⁵. Taking as a starting point the same linguistico-psychoanalytical method, I intend this year to adopt a not only musical but also theatrical form of writing (with luminous scenography, the electronic treatment of sound) in order to reveal with still more evidence and force the flux of the text.

Clara Maïda, September 5th, 1999
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¹⁵ Henri Michaux, *Moments, traversées du temps*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, 131 p.