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interview with thierry de mey

### Adolescence

The same trigger led to my approaching cinema and music head on, as a teenager. As always, the catalyst was a meeting, in this case my meeting with a teacher at the Brussels-based film school, IAD. And I wonder if the gentleman still exists. Are there still any traces of Henri Van Lier, who meditated with grand gestures in front of the distributor of 'vintage coke bottles' as he invoked Warhol and Barthes and had us read Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and others willy-nilly? We probably did not understand much of what he said, but something nevertheless did get across from his teaching, namely, that sincere artistic commitment could rely (must rely, in my opinion) on conceptual tools and even, to be more precise, a sense of mathematical structure, that is, the desire for precision that I measured by the number of hours spent at the time at Go clubs and competitions.

Van Lier is the one who gave me a 33 rpm of Steve Reich's 'Four Organs' one day ('music to listen to lying down' is how he put it). Well, that - the rhythmic desynchronisations and apparent structure, yet the urbane, slag-filled sound - was a harsh wake-up call! It led to hitchhiking to attend the debut of 'Drumming' and 'Music for Eighteen Musicians' followed by another pilgrimage to Trinity Church to listen to Messiaen improvising on the organ. What a strange and beautiful scene: the parishioners scattered around the church, their faces turned to the altar, with the music lovers sitting opposite them, their faces turned to the organ!

### The central nerve: rhythm as movement

The impact of Van Lier's teachings was then doubled and accelerated by a second meeting, for one master is not enough. You need at least two. I met Fernand Schirren through my sister, Michèle-Anne, who was studying dance at (Béjart's school) Mudra. At the time, Schirren was a 'rhythm teacher' and percussionist linked to [Béjart's ballet company], Ballets du XXème Siècle, and accompanist for silent films at Brussels' Film Museum. He was a sort of adorable Zarathustra of Bara Street, the epitome of the Brussels inhabitant. Now I give that a very specific meaning, for this many-layered city and perpetual construction site has developed a critical spirit and works like an ironic code-breaker of fossilized systems. Schirren came up with a consistent way of thinking about rhythm and movement and, more precisely, of rhythm as movement. He had his 'philosophy of rhythm' take its place within a dualism that he extended to all possible areas. His concepts in this regard could be summarised by two onomatopoeic words: 'Hey' and 'Boom'. The 'hey' designated the starting point of rhythmic movement, emission, the jump, the arc and, by extension, difference and individuation. The 'boom' designated the point of arrival, rest and, by extension, sameness, sharing. From an aesthetic standpoint, this vision created an insoluble tension between the two poles, keeping us at a distance from being immersed in sameness - repetition - as much as from losing all landmarks because of the always different (which, through generalised serialism, imposed the musical correctness of the time). Between the 'hey' and 'boom' one finds, at the apex of the curve, as a keystone of rhythmic continuity, the ictus, which is a term borrowed from classical prosody.

Without knowing it, Schirren was not very far from Saint Augustine, whose remarks on rhythm are reflected in the Gradual of Gregorian chants. In this work, the sung rhythm is

conceived of through the walked step, with the next step already included in the completed step, and is rendered explicit by the highly fractal, on the whole, metaphor of the great wave that modulates the ocean, whilst being modulated itself by the smaller waves that it contains.

A crucial lesson! What impressed me there - and continues to guide me - is the refusal to consider rhythm as the pure combinatorics of durations within a time matrix or striations of time. Rhythm combinatorics interests me, I'm even terribly interested in it, and I've built myself a huge personal library of rhythm algorithms, but you must never let go of your intuitions of jumps, of the play of surges and falls. Writing knows no bounds, provided that you do not let go of your intuition of movement. That is the crux of the matter. That, too, is the major conflict, my major refusal: that of musical writing as a self-referring syntactic system. A computation is good if it amplifies and plaits the rhythmic curves, if it projects movements onto new topologies, but if it lets go of the curve, if it destroys the arc, it is bad. That is perhaps my only grid of values, the nerve of my writing, what decides what I keep or what I erase. It's the idea of the mathematician René Thom - the author of catastrophe theory - and an idea that so impressed Lacan, 'the true is limited not by the false, but by the insignificant'. In my work, in my own experience, I term 'insignificant' a musical time that elapses without jumping.

### Writing in situation

It is not enough to have principles and intuitions, that is for sure. You still have to organise a life that allows them. I managed, more or less deliberately, to tackle 'pure music', that's to say, the writing of music destined in the first place for a concert, as little as possible. Most of what I've written, even if I claim it to be sovereign practical music ('I am not making wallpaper,' as Stravinsky said), I wrote it in parallel with the development of a choreography (often with Anne-Teresa De Keersmaeker, who has been my accomplice from the very beginning) or a film (in this case, my own films). Dance and film thus become the guardrails of writing. These living objects are something pitiless. They take life in actual space, not that of my desk, and make forays into the most gratifying compositional developments, which they filter most cruelly. It works or it doesn't work. The stakes are immediately clear, you have to be able to dance or to put together a film. Another pleasure calls out from the heart of writing and demands its rights.

I know, this pragmatism doubtless has its limits, but it gives me enough to chew over, think about, and feel for years to come. Hence a certain wariness, let's say, of some composer who plays Tetris with durations and heights, darts with Markov's chains and handcuffs, Pacman with the spiciest contact lists of his news groups, subdividing tuplets and time signatures while his Mac computes the 55th interpolation between Tristan and the Bodyguard's theme song. If he disguises himself as Zorro to run his systems of constraints in the Saturday evening workshops, offers himself random walks and Brownian movements in the red district of Sim City's summer academies, is plagued by dandruff and oily hair and is yellow as a Belgian endive tanned by the super-X rays of his machine, if he smells of must and cold cigars, you mustn't hold that against him, for, as Wittgenstein said, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.' As for the ideas other than strictly artistic ones - psychological or political tensions, philosophical theories, mystical beliefs, etc. - that authors may brandish to get the little sewing machine of the sublime running, if they generally do not fail to provide a good reserve of forces (isn't it said that believers march to the front more readily?), it is nevertheless intellectually inept to count on them to appreciate the work itself. Or even worse, to deduce from them the conditions that are likely to reproduce miracles (this brings to

mind Captain Haddock who, from his seat in the theatre - was it in *The Seven Crystal Balls?* - studied the tricks of the magician turning water into wine), but I'm straying from the subject.

Wall of structure and resistance of the body. *Rosas danst Rosas*

I wrote my first piece for Anne-Teresa De Keersmaeker, with whom I premeditated on the rules of the game and formal strategy. This gave the ballet and musical suite *Rosas danst Rosas*. At the time we were rather, um, involved in the writings of Georges Bataille, in his analyses of the discontinuity that language introduces into the continuity of the animal world, and all the attempts at reunification, in which ecstasy and transgression exist side by side. To make something of that we first had to have a shape that was bolted to the extreme, a genuine structural wall that the four dancers would fling themselves against with all their might. The structure in this case was a sort of sadistic master, forcing constraints, speed, and exertion on the bodies. But all of the choreographic vocabulary, on the contrary, was on the side of desire and composed chiefly of sexual attitudes and drives. So, there was tension and contrast between a cold, predetermined, irreversible shape rushing to its logical end, and the physical gifts of the dancers, who were over-eroticised by the infinite repetition of a small number of figures carrying very strong connotations. And finally, the body was glorified as the ultimate form of resistance against turning everything into figures.

It was the 'grand école'. We could make the algorithms as complex as we wanted, provided that we allowed the bodies to check and surmount them. My remarks may make people smile, but I contend that this was a political attitude. Today, when the body's sentient existence must compete more and more openly with machines, we have to hold onto physical presence as a standard of sense. Not all symbolic creations make sense. The most perfectly designed syntax can never justify itself. It's curious, it's paradoxical, but the world of music is a place where that remains to be said, where that may seem to be scandalously reactionary, but for a slip of the tongue. I thus make it my duty to recognise the forms that I produce in a certain way, to wait for and seize the very moment that I identify with the form.

Rhythmic processes: distinction and entropy

This taste for the incursion of organic movement into a logical machine gradually brought me closer to French 'spectralism'. The deterioration of processes and exploration of thresholds have fuelled my thinking about rhythm. My first works played with rhythm through figures, with each figure presenting a particular quality of movement, a sort of driving state for the body, or a dance step. This is particularly clear in *Musique de Tables*, written in 1987. It is a piece for percussion as well as a short ballet of hands. It's constructed like a baroque suite, with an overture, rondo, fugato, galop, recapitulation, and coda. The entire rhythmic counterpoint uses a limited number of figures that I described precisely, but metaphorically as well, to the dancers: the volta, typist, windscreen wipers, pianist, flick, points, etc. (I've kept this habit of naming the figures that I use (primarily for myself), of compiling a personal glossary that accompanies me throughout the writing phase.) The musicologist André Hebbelink was kind enough to compare me to Robinson Crusoe: it makes no difference what machines people my island, provided that I can build each gear to my own specifications). But in this piece I was already using, more or less wildly, the notion of 'rhythmic borrowing', [that is], I would replace the silences in a given figure with beats and vice versa, to create complementary rhythms that each hinted at the other. I am reworking that today, more finely, by replacing each unit of silence, whatever its length, with a beat that I place exactly in the middle of the silent interval. By treating the resulting rhythm the same way, and doing so

several times in succession, you inevitably come up with increasingly indefinite rhythmic figures that are increasing close to regular pulsation (in the area of rhythm, this could be likened to zero level, to entropy, the unorganised, with what is distinct being a rhythm that produces movement). At high speed, this play of thresholds between organised rhythm and regular pulsation enables me to tackle another ambiguity, that between rhythm and height (since we know, since Stockhausen - and other have known it since Fat Boy Slim - that a frequency is also a type of rhythm). Other changing strategies of this shape/countershape or mould/cast interplay can be set up by shifting the beat from the centre towards the edges of the interval. That's probably too technical to go into here. Let me simply point out that the word 'form' comes from an ancient Greek (or Etruscan) word meaning 'cheese mould'. That brings us back, in a way, to Captain Haddock. Sorry, let's move on.

Harmony: nature and dynamic material

Let's come back, instead, to the matter of frequencies. Having taught a little at seminars, I realise how much at a loss many young composers are when I ask them, candidly, 'well, and how do you organise the heights?' Many of them do not even seem to consider this parameter pertinent or interesting. That's often where the cards are laid on the table, when you can tell what the bloke is made of. It seems to me that we cannot skip over Grisey's thinking, that we can no longer avoid dealing with the question of the acoustic model, and dealing with the question that comes out of it, and which is perhaps THE question of the day, namely, 'Acoustic models, granted. But how do you move them? How do you make them move?' Tonal music has a complex topology, because the shortest path from do (C) to re (D) is via sol (G). That's obviously more simplistic in the 'academic', shall we say, spectral model, without a possible cadence effect, without a leading note effect, where you are limited to a sort of virtuoso 'morphing' from one harmonic field to another, through pure translation. For my part, I've found a tiny bit of a solution in my old 'arte povera' bags. I retain from natural sound phenomena only the 'poor buggers', those that slide, that hesitate, that contain an inner conflict: the multiphonics of the oboe or clarinet, frequency 'knots' of the cello, etc. These sounds are dynamic, with phase beating; they are multiple right from the start. Those are the ones I need; those are the ones that I import into my computations. They are the raw materials of Kinok and my Quatuor à cordes.

On the other hand, I readily apply a 'spectral' way of thinking to time, for example, in hijacking the functions for computing the virtual fundamentals - a necessary operation to deduce the spectral components - in order to determine the virtual pulsing that links beats expressed in isolation or that I wedge between two contradictory processes (for example, something that I adore, a beam of accelerations that contradicts a beam of decelerations, like cutting a wheel in half through its thickness and having the two halves turn in opposite directions). Or, still in the same spirit, I produce acoustic 'zooms' by distributing the order of the heights and durations according to the perceptive weight of the frequencies (in working, for example, on an oboe multiphonic or a four-note violin chord). The orchestrations of Kinok and Enredadera are based on this principle.

On naturalism

A suspicion hovers over the composers who are fond of spectral techniques. They are thought to be somewhat Rameau-ist, sort of the 'naturalists' or 'environmentalists' of the music world, rather unaware of the symbolic universe's resources. There is distaste for submitting to nature and a triumphal assertion of the rights of combinatorics. Yet all of this

seems to me to be terribly obsolete, outdated, to have been superseded long ago by the computer's omnipresence. The computer has truly cancelled, rendered vain and without glory, all craftsmanship in combinatorial exploration. A self-referring logical system can be invented in a matter of seconds using a computer; it works every time; no more need for staying up all night, going into trances, or pots of strong coffee. The area that you can explore, on the contrary, the place where you can bet on being sleepless, is exactly the territory where the computer issues a revolutionary challenge to the physical model, well beyond a quarrel between abstraction and figuration or between numbers and nature.

### Poetics and politics

For what is it all about? No more nor less than letting the poetic come through. Far from a useless formal game, the poetic stake is that of all true freedom. Setting aside time for this type of adventure and creating a space for it in itself is a political platform.

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remarks taken down by Jean-Luc Plouvier for the Musica Festival in Strasbourg.