

CDs AND DVDs

JEAN-CLAUDE ELOY: *États-Limités, ou les cris de Petra* (*Chants pour l'autre moitié du ciel n° VII*). Hors territoires HT 23

Jean-Claude Eloy's oeuvre represents one of the great adventures in Western art music composition over the past 50 years. Having come to prominence in the post-serial environment of the early 1960s as the most talented of the post-Boulez generation in France, Eloy left France in 1965 and relocated for a period to California, where his increased study of non-Western musical cultures, exposure to the freer milieu at Berkeley, and burgeoning friendship with Stockhausen sparked a concerted move away from perceived academically ingrained habitudes towards the invention of a more globally outward-looking music. Fruits of this ambitious ethos include the huge electroacoustic frescos of *Shānti* (1972–73) and *Gaku-No-Michi* (1977–78) and the three-and-a-half-hour-long *Anāhata* (1986–94) for gagaku instruments, voices, percussion and tape, whose performance in 1990 at Donaueschingen proved quite controversial.

Eloy's project implicitly entails a type of 'impropriety' that might make some of the more aesthetically conservative members of the new music fraternity feel uncomfortable. It is thus unsurprising that in the early 1980s Eloy was one of two prominent composers (the other being Xenakis) to take issue in the French press with IRCAM's perceived monopoly of French new musical life and state subsidies, arguing that the long-term effect would be an homogenisation of musical activity and a potential uniformity of style. Following this, certain of Boulez's allies with clout in France's musical scene attempted to marginalise Eloy. All of this is of moment for the historiography of late twentieth-century music, both on a local French and a broader European scale; and the opposition of rebel (here Eloy) and dry old academy is, of course, a familiar story in art history (the visionary William Blake against the backwards-facing Joshua Reynolds comes to mind).

This CD features the seventh piece in Eloy's cycle *Chants pour l'autre moitié du ciel* (Songs for

the Other Half of the Sky). The *Chants* cycle, which is open-ended, was commissioned by Michel Guy, then France's Minister of Culture and founder (in 1971) of the Paris Festival d'Automne, in 1989 for performance at that year's Festival d'Automne and in commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution. The cycle's initial name was thus *Libérations*, and the two pieces premiered in 1989, *Butsumyôe* and *Sappho hiketis*, now comprise the first two parts of the cycle. Certain characteristics of these first two pieces indicate the formal template (a somewhat loose one) guiding the cycle as a whole: each piece treats the female voice as the main protagonist; each is composed in collaboration with a specific female vocalist; and each takes off from texts by or concerning prominent women. (*Butsumyôe* uses a Japanese text by Ihara Saikaku, *Sappho hiketis* a Modern Greek translation of Sappho, and both are composed for the voices of Yumi Nara and Fátima Miranda.) Pieces in the cycle can be either acoustic or electroacoustic, and key stylistic aspects of each *Chant* are determined by the individual performer with whom Eloy is working.

There are several themes in the *Chants*. One is the Simondon-esque principle of individuation, which Eloy opposes to the 'normative structures' with which processes of individuation come into contact. For Eloy, the voice is a paradigm of the individual, an auditory fingerprint that defines each of us, and humanity's first musical instrument, whose 'unmediated' status finds a twin in the virtual equipment of digital musical technology. Another theme Eloy explores in the *Chants* is the feminine as an embodiment of the individual and as a potentially socially destabilising force. Women such as Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rosa Luxemburg, Simone Weil and Saint Teresa of Avila are cited as women who, perceived as a threat by the established order of the day, have suffered the brunt of reactive aggression. These elements of the female and the individual are channelled through the *Chants* cycles three main elements: the religious, revolt and Eros – the elements in which, says Eloy, the need for liberation has historically usually manifested.

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États-limites (Borderlines) is an electroacoustic work composed with various computer programmes, the sampled sound of percussion instruments and the voice of Petra Meinel-Winkelbach. Eloy's work with Meinel-Winkelbach dates from the early 1990s, when the French composer was invited to work at the WDR studios in Cologne (where he had composed his 1971 work *Shânti*). There he recorded some sessions with Meinel-Winkelbach, who used various types of vocal techniques and recited some texts selected by Eloy in German. When Eloy recently revisited the material recorded in these sessions, he sought in the final composition to engage imaginatively with Meinel-Winkelbach's personality and presence. Only after completing *États-limites* did Eloy learn that Meinel-Winkelbach had died shortly after their recording session; the piece is appropriately dedicated to her.

The title of this work – 'Borderlines' – refers to the borderline personality that is often the concomitant of the artistic temperament; a personality that can alternate between ecstatic lucidity and depressed fog, between energetic and torpid, and that as often leads to self-destruction as to the bequeathing of new artworks in our culture's imaginary museum. Eric Cordier has written that, in these terms, Eloy's oeuvre betrays 'a kind of salutary madness'; Eloy, in response, expressed his hope that this should always remain the case.

États-limites is 79 minutes long and in one continuous movement. The electronic component of the texture is a monolithic, slow-moving

slab of sound, frequencies distributed across the auditory spectrum. The slow-moving synthetic wash has a pronounced organic quality, its evolution seeming to embody something sentient. Alongside computer synthesis and female voice, Eloy has recorded resonant percussion in the form of many large quarter-tone tuned cowbells, whose strikes punctuate the texture throughout. At times the electronic sonority has the type of resonant quality about it as if a drumstick were being rubbed around a Tibetan bowl. Meinel-Winkelbach's voice is often absent and generally appears at intervals of five minutes or so. In its initial appearances, gasping fearfully or moaning erotically, her voice is unprocessed, and stands out in relief against the background texture. At other times the voice is slowed down, tuned down or rendered unrecognisable. At one point Meinel-Winkelbach engages in overtone singing, melding in an uncanny way with the electronic texture, whose frequencies and formants become attuned to the acoustic structure of her voice. Building over its 79 minutes, *États-limites* has an immersive quality that one betrays if one pauses the CD.

Back in 1990 the first two pieces of *Chants pour l'autre moitié du ciel* were performed at the Almeida Festival in London. Might we hope for some of the cycle (or indeed some of Eloy's other music) to be performed again in the UK in the near future – perhaps at Huddersfield or the LCMF?

Liam Cagney Q1

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