



**Jean-Claude Eloy**

*Shânti*

Hors Territoires 2×CD

*Gaku-No-Michi*

Hors Territoires 4×CD

The name of Jean-Claude Eloy is not one you'll often encounter in thumbnail sketches of French electroacoustic music; he's rarely mentioned in the same breath as Schaeffer, Henry, Ferrari et al. In fact, when these CDs first arrived I immediately assumed some connection with the pompous German Prog outfit Eloy. Thankfully this Eloy is a very different animal. Born in Rouen, in 1938, Jean-Claude Eloy was fortunate enough to come from the last generation to be educated under those formidable French modernists, Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen, and young enough to be buffeted along on the tide of innovations from Gielen and Boulez's post-Darmstadt aesthetics to the 1960s/70s electronic revolution of Pousseur and Stockhausen. These twinned CD sets restore two of Eloy's most celebrated 1970s works to print, and reveal him as a herald of Noise, a prodigious maximalist, a sculptor in time.

The earliest of the two pieces, *Shânti* (*Peace*), was completed in 1974. Its composition follows a spell in 1972–73 when he was invited by Stockhausen to the WDR Studios in Cologne. Prior to that point Eloy had mostly been composing terse orchestral work in the post-Darmstadt idiom, but he hit Cologne right at that productive and slightly feverish period when Stockhausen was bolting his electronic music to notions of orientalism and One World mysticism. Eloy – by this time well travelled in the Americas and all over Asia – it seems was right on board.

This was an era of high-endurance, process based art, from the endless film essays of Michael Snow to the droneworks of La Monte Young and Tony Conrad; not forgetting the Buddhist-inspired early

work of Eloy's compatriot Eliane Radigue and the extended electronic odysseys of Can and Tangerine Dream. At over two hours, *Shânti* is an omnivorous feast, with Eloy gorging himself upon all the principal electronic music techniques of the time: tape looping, oscillators, potentiometers and a mind-boggling array of filtering equipment. He called it a meditation, but it's a much more active meditation than the proto-Ambient sludge you so often get with analogue synthesis: a muggy, ever-changing cumulus of laminar sound; a recurring theme like a groggy calliope or a far-off Messiaen organ study; the penetration of human voices – political rallies, terrace chants, Sri Aurobindo, Mao.

But *Shânti* was a mere white dwarf next to the supernova size of his next electronic creation, *Gaku-No-Michi* (*The Ways Of Music*). Realised with engineer Tsutomu Koshima at Tokyo's NHK Studios, its gargantuan four hours are presented here complete for the first time. It has been called an 'electroacoustic fresco', which doesn't do a bad job of describing its static, yet curiously alive array of tableaux. Just as fresco is paint applied to still-wet plaster, *Gaku-No-Michi* has just-recognisable location recordings, taken around Japan, brushed into a febrile electronic sound of an endlessly mutable character.

The piece is an articulation of 'Japanese' elements. It draws on field recordings of city life; the sounds of traditional clogs, railway station platform announcements, street traffic, and the inevitable pachinko parlours. But it steadfastly refuses the cliché of 'Zen calm'. It's a deeply restless and questing experience, frequently violent and abrasive in tone. "Fushiki-e" ("Towards What Is Unknowable"), the 80 minute second section – call it a 'tranche'? – contains a million-franc moment, a glowing celestial chord that steeples up from the murk and proceeds to swandive

around the aural picture in weird, melting swoops and surges. After several minutes it morphs into a phasing, beating drone, like two out-of-sync jet engines, before being subsumed. These are remarkable transfigurations that sound like much more than manipulated knobs and faders: you picture instead legions of assistants hauling on gigantic levers, or spinning outside ship's wheels in an attempt to keep the sound-hulk on its rightful course.

There's a metaphysics at play behind the engineering, too: the whole piece is an essay in stepping outside of quotidian time: its immensely built-up sediments of sound are composed of loops and manipulated noises, multi-tracked and running at vastly differentiated speeds, backwards and forwards.

Time captured on tape is made malleable as clay. Where so much digital music of our Twittering age sounds like the fidgets of pernickety young men who envied their mothers' knitting needles, Eloy seems to be dicing with colossal forces almost beyond his control, a demi-urge attempting to master the art of continental drift. The late 70s tended to be a thin patch for electronic music, as analogue and primitive computer music gave way to proto-digital tools, but *Gaku-No-Michi*, in its supremacist glory, must now stand as one of the triumphant achievements of its time. There's a radiance and a vitality to Eloy's music, as well as a sheer awing architectural scale, that leaves the air vibrating long after the sound has ceased.

Alongside *Shânti*, it now sounds like a descendent of the kind of musical expanse Varese was aiming at in his 1960 landmark *Déserts*, or the geological timeframes expressed in Tod Dockstader's early tape pieces. They are expansive continents unto themselves: vast tracts to be trudged until you collapse, exhausted, at the silence of an oasis. □

The prodigious electroacoustic compositions of **Jean-Claude Eloy** evoke the sound and sense of perpetual transformation across geological time. By Rob Young