

Sophie Lacaze

Portrait of a Composer

Dialogues with Geneviève Mathon

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Foreword

These dialogues began very simply. One day we decided to start them and just as easily we decided to end them. We do not live in the same city, so we chose to converse by electronic means, the current version of the epistolary exchange. Such messages could be very close together, or a relatively long time could elapse between two emails. But a thought, a momentum, were on the way. We proceeded in a linear manner and the parts fell into place on their own.

The questions and answers usually flowed, sometimes there were stumbling blocks. During a discussion, there are expectations, unanswered questions and questions that never come up. My expectations were misled, thwarted, fulfilled. In this sense, there is never any end to the process of exchange. And the reader represents the third entity, multiple and irreducible, in an expectation and a questioning.

First we had to write, exchange and then erase what seemed uninteresting, repetitive, or off-topic; but it is difficult to think what is off-topic, not part of the musical field; this field is broad and continued to expand as our dialogues progressed.

For me, it was a question of identifying this turn of the century, elusive and abundant, for which we lack visibility and/or distance to identify a few anchor points and vanishing points.

Identifying an era through a composer has proven to be a complete, necessary and judicious choice. A minority, therefore.

It is clear that the musical world today can be described as an addition, a juxtaposition of minorities. My

profession as a musicologist has changed, and it is urgent to continue to comment, testify and observe without preconceived ideas, without any pretension.

A composer, then, whose catalogue is already substantial but whose progress and reflection on musical and worldly matters can be fully appreciated with each new piece. Creativity and commitment go hand in hand in Sophie Lacaze's journey. Is making music (creating it, sharing it and making it known, defending it and playing it) a function, a necessity, a necessary luxury, a challenge? Sophie Lacaze represents a composer's journey today.

The book is divided into five chapters, illustrating different aspects of Sophie Lacaze's compositional approach: "At the beginning", "Instrumentality", "Vocality", "The composer and the city", "The meaning of music" – with three annexes: the texts chosen as a source of inspiration for Sophie Lacaze's instrumental works or as a support for her vocal works; an analysis by the composer of her piece *Het Lam Gods*, for string quartet; and finally the text of a lecture entitled "La musique des *Quatre éléments* – concerto pour flûte, chœur d'enfants et percussions de Sophie Lacaze" that I presented at Evry University in 2012¹, as part of the symposium *Compositeurs entre quatre éléments – pour une approche bachelardienne de la musique*.

Geneviève Mathon

¹ Organized by André Lischké and Grégoire Tossier, on 29 and 30 November 2012.

Geneviève Mathon: *Is there a childhood of art? What would yours be, personally? Singular events, people, encounters? Something so engaging that it explains your relationship to music, to the life of sounds, as this is how I perceive your music...*

Sophie Lacaze: At first... there was a piano. Well, not quite, there were actually two pianos. The first one was a beautiful baby grand, located in the living room; only grown-ups could approach it... It fascinated me. The second one was in a corner of the big hall, a small upright piano that nobody used. I was four or five, I lived in Toulouse but I spent all the school holidays with my grandparents in Lourdes – where the pianos were. My grandfather was a notable of the city, and my grandmother, like many women of that time, had devoted herself to the education of her four sons, all of whom had a promising career ahead of them.

All four had learned to play the piano in their childhood, but I had never heard them play. It was only about fifteen years later that I realised that my father and his younger brother were at the level of a higher conservatory diploma.

But let's go back to my 5th birthday... This little upright piano extended its arms (or rather its keys) to me every time I stayed at my grandparents' house. In the face of the sustained interest that I had shown in it, my parents enrolled me in a half-hour weekly class with Mademoiselle Lefèbvre, a Toulouse music teacher renowned for her excellence and her high standards. Not having a piano at home was a little tricky, but the principal of my elementary school allowed me to work in one of the school's music rooms. My mother took me there twice a week, and I was making good progress.

A few years later, Mademoiselle Lefèbvre explained to my mother that I really liked the piano, and that it would be nice for me to have one at home. Unfortunately, there wasn't really any room in the apartment, and in any case I was going to enter the 6th grade – serious matters were about to start and it would have been inappropriate for me to spend too much time making music. My father, a prominent scientist, wanted his daughters to go to school to get a good job and become financially independent. In the family, being a musician was not regarded as a proper job to earn a decent living. So... I stopped the piano lessons...

No music in secondary school, but drawing and sewing classes for young girls... I was chomping at the bit, and regularly pricked my fingers!

Fortunately, at the age of 14, when I arrived at high school, I was able to sign up for the music option. This was an opportunity for me to discover, like most high school students of that era, the recorder. I would, of course, have preferred to play the piano again, but in the meantime... I started playing the recorder, playing... a lot... and entered the Conservatoire de Toulouse the following year, directly in the 5th year. I took a few solfeggio lessons (I had never done one before, although I had learned to read music during my piano lessons), discovered a whole Baroque and Renaissance repertoire that I didn't know, and met other instrumentalists for the first time.

And what about composition in all this, you may ask? It was in high school, I must have been 15 years old, when I woke up one morning knowing for a fact that I would become a composer. A strange, even a little crazy idea, since I did not know any professional musicians, had no clue about their lives, and even less about that of a composer. I hardly ever went to a concert, and did not hear much music at home

(except for a few pieces by Beethoven that my father particularly liked).

The other aspect, which had not disturbed me the least, was that all the pieces I had worked on or heard so far had been written by men, and at that time I didn't know a single female composer's name. I now know that the lack of a "model" can discourage female vocations, but it was not a problem for me. If little girls were supposed to play with dolls, I, as a child, quickly put mine in a cupboard and played with the electric train instead. As girls or boys, we were allowed to play the same games, why not, later, have the same job?

In fact, I had been writing for a long time, but words, not music. Poems in elementary school, a play and even the beginning of a novel in high school... Unfortunately, I was not very good, it took a lot of effort for a mediocre result.

With music, however, things were different, I loved the lessons, I learned a lot, I easily improvised at the piano... I felt I had to go in this direction.

I was determined, I wanted to be a creator, and it would be accomplished through music...

GM: So, where does this attraction to the world of sound come from, to the point where you declared you would be a composer: an attraction, a vocation without a model and almost without an object...

SL: My discovery of the world of sound and nature, a nature that can be found everywhere in my music, came shortly after my paternal grandfather's death. I was eleven, it was the end of the holidays in Lourdes. So from then we spent every summer at my great-grandmother's house, on my mother's side. She lived in a small village in the Hautes-

Pyrénées. The house, an old farm, was rustic and had only three rooms. On the other hand, there was a huge garden, with a vegetable plot, plenty of flowers, chickens, ducks, rabbits, dogs... We used to go to the neighbouring farm to get the milk, and I regularly went with my great-grandmother to do errands at the village grocery store. We often met her neighbours there, with whom she talked in Occitan. I couldn't understand it, but it was singing in my ears...

GM: You could have been listening to a language that sings to your ears, a music of the language....

SL: For sure, and also an awareness of my Occitan origins I believe. The music and poetry of the troubadours, which I discovered much later, immediately moved me. It is something I feel very deeply, an art close to me, despite the 9 centuries that separate us.

GM: What about the music of nature? Of course, it is linked to places, to a topology, to mountains, their depth, their particular resonance... And perhaps to the song of birds, the cries of animals?

SL: I think the trigger came in the summer of my 14th birthday. As I was a bit tired of sharing the bedroom with the whole family, I set up a small tent at the back of the garden, brought my camp bed, my recorder, and spent two months there during the summer holidays. It was one of the most beautiful summers of my teenage years. At the back of this large garden, with a magnificent view of the Pyrenees mountains, everything was just sounds and smells of nature... For me, as a teenager, it was magical.

GM: And then what happened? How about the encounter with written music, known as scholarly music, with your favourite composers. How did all this shape you?

SL: This came much later. When I entered the ENSEEIHT (Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Electronique, d'Electrotechnique, d'Informatique et d'Hydraulique in Toulouse), my father bought a piano and I was able to take some classes again. When I graduated from school, with my engineering degree, I was hired by a Renault subsidiary in Annecy. I stayed a year and a half in this beautiful city, and took the opportunity to study harmony at the Conservatory while taking private piano lessons. I always imagined becoming a composer, but my new professional life, my financial independence, made me think that music, even if it was still my passion, may not be my priority.

And then I met Paul Tortelier. While in Annecy for a concert, he had been invited by the Conservatory. I admired this exceptional cellist greatly and was able to attend his lecture. He told us about the urge to compose that had become his, and that's when I realised that it was also mine... I had to become a composer, and I was going to do everything in my power to do so...

Six months later, I was hired as an IT project manager in the Capital Markets Department of Crédit Lyonnais. The young provincial woman I was went to the capital... and I discovered that in Paris, I could take composition classes. Finally, I would be able to learn how to compose! Even if I first had to follow the traditional curriculum of analysis, harmony, counterpoint, fugue... before I could attempt to join a composition class...

I enrolled at the Conservatoire du centre de Paris for a few classes, at the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris for others, and alongside my young career as a bank manager, I was able to follow those who interested me. Fortunately, my head of department at the time was a music lover, and was flexible with my schedule...

It was during the analysis class with Ginette Keller, a wonderful professor at the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris, that I discovered the music of the Middle Ages and the 20th century. The music of the troubadours had immediately enthralled me, as mentioned earlier, but she also made me love Hildegard von Bingen, Guillaume de Machaut, Josquin des Prez, Edgar Varèse, Béla Bartok, Luciano Berio, György Ligeti... And with Machaut's isorhythmia, Webern's series, Bartok's use of the golden number and the Fibonacci sequence, Iannis Xenakis's stochastic music, I understood the role that mathematics could play in music. Of course, it resonated with me deeply.

I then decided to skip the "superior harmony" and "fugue" stages, which did not seem to me to be very useful for what I was aiming to do, and joined Michel Merlet's composition class at the ENMP. I had just turned 27.

GM: *What were your major aesthetic shocks in those years: works you heard, or shows you attended that transformed you, that made you different afterwards?*

SL: I don't think I've ever had a "great aesthetic shock" in music at any time in my life. Of course, there are many works that have deeply moved me, and they still do. I could mention about twenty of them, but could I say that these magnificent works, sometimes performed exquisitely

(because the performance is obviously essential), have made me more thrilled than a bird song, than the sound of the breeze in the trees or the ebb and flow of the waves on the beach? I don't think so.

"Wisdom for a musician is to listen to no one's advice but the wind that blows and tells us the history of the world..." wrote Debussy. He also said: "Music is a mysterious mathematics whose elements are part of the infinite and which is responsible for the movement of the waters, for the play of curves that describe the changing breezes; nothing is more musical than a sunset"... I agree so strongly with him...

However, one show did have a profound impact on me during my years of composition studies. In 1993, at the Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre, Georges Aperghis created *Sextuor*. From the outset, I had the impression of entering a strange, wonderfully poetic world, from which I only emerged on the last note. A whole hour "elsewhere". It was truly magical.

Music is an art of time. And time is for me one of the most difficult aspects to master in composition. Georges Aperghis had managed to control it for one hour... I found (and still find) this remarkable.

His work had also revealed to me vocal possibilities that I did not yet know, his very particular language, his world of poetry. It may have made me want to write for voice, to experiment with musical theatre, perhaps it also reinforced my intention to develop my own musical language... In 1993, all this was not yet very clear, I was just writing *Voyelles*... But then I often thought about this *Sextuor*, then I saw the creation of his *Machinations* in 2000. I think this is when it became clearer from a language research point of view.

GM: Have you had any deep connections or closeness with musical or other works of art, or valuable accompaniments?

Or were there any artists whom you admired? These elective affinities, as they say, what are they?

And where does it stand now in a journey that has already been thoroughly tested?

SL: There are aesthetic affinities with composers whose works I like to listen to because they move me. For example, I am thinking of those already mentioned: von Bingen, Machaut, Debussy, Satie, Varèse, Bartok, Ligeti, Aperghis, and also Strozzi, Monteverdi, Pergolesi, Bach, Cage, Taïra, Takemitsu, Monk, Reich... as well as many Romantic composers. Beethoven is the first of them and his music is sublime. Such ardour, such beauty in all this...

But there are also intellectual affinities, and I think that these have left a stronger mark on me as a composer than my aesthetic affinities. For instance, my Cartesian mind was immediately drawn to serial music. Listening to it, I'm not particularly fond of the music of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. However, I am a great admirer of Webern's, whose work I analysed a lot during my studies. This music sounds magnificently good and its construction is highly rigorous. Another aspect that interested me was the brevity of these pieces. Webern says everything in a very short time. And it works, you don't have time to get bored, but you don't feel anything missing. This is outstanding.

The first work I brought to Michel Merlet was a serial string quartet. I will always remember what he told me then: "How did you manage to make such a romantic piece with such a system?" He was right, my quartet sounded a bit like

Schumann! And it was not a great success, but it made me want to deepen this particular technique...

My second piece as a student, made for piano, was a stochastic composition. Four short pieces based on probability calculations. I was, of course, inspired by Xenakis. However, apart from *Nuits*, which is an extremely poignant work, Xenakis' music does not particularly move me.

Shortly afterwards, I immersed myself in Bartok's music. The perfection of form in his works has always fascinated me. This is certainly due to the genius of the composer, but the regular use of the golden number and the Fibonacci sequence is no stranger to this.

Today, my works still use the Fibonacci sequence, as well as some techniques from serialism.

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