

## More that one string to Pascal Dusapin's bow

A conversation with Beckett

2 July 1980-15 June 2005: twenty-five years separate, with punctiliousness, the first performances of *Musique fugitive* and of *Quartet V*, the temporary end to Pascal Dusapin's chamber music for strings. Two new quartets<sup>1</sup> will be added in 2010, doubtless before the next opuses. This is an *œuvre* in motion and, as in other areas of his musical biography (the orchestra, opera, the piano...), Pascal Dusapin has built it in continuance and with this trio and the five quartets he establishes a coherent corpus with time. He helps the listener to apprehend some of his aspirations as well as the evolution of his writing, from the urgency of the youthful Trio (eight minutes of taut music, characterised by 'the refusal of any predictable development'<sup>2</sup>) up to the cantabile meanders of the *Fifth Quartet*, vaguely Gipsy-like and melancholy. This edition traces the journey backwards, in a reverse progression going back in time, like observing geological strata in cross-section: sediment slowly deposited but upset by neighbouring events.

The fact that the initiative for this recording comes from the Arditti Quartet is also to be emphasised. In addition, 'The Ardittis' premiered four of these six scores (the Paris String Trio and the Pražák Quartet giving the first performances of the Trio and *Quartet IV* respectively), and since the Eighties, Dusapin's

music is so familiar and intimately associated with them that this release bears witness at the same time to this quarter-century itinerary. Complicity, transmission and comprehension find their balance thanks to an extraordinary renewal<sup>3</sup>.

Even without the 'initial project'<sup>4</sup>, the series has been assembled with regularity: 1980, 1983 (revised in 1996), 1990, 1993, 1997, 2005<sup>5</sup>. We know that the greatest quartet cycles—those of Beethoven, Bartók, Shostakovich et al.—all reveal something about their authors. Diaries, forms offering an ideal combination between musical abstraction and metaphysics, between research in writing and narrative introspection, they inevitably draw up a musical *and* biographical portrait, something that is not completely eluded here, either. In the interplay of musical correspondences, stylistic kinships are brought to light with other scores composed in neighbouring chronologies (*Quartet V* with the fifth opera, *Faustus, The Last Night*, composed in 2003-04; the second, *Time Zones*, prefiguring *To Be Sung; IV* associated with *Clam*, solo no. 4 for orchestra, written in 1997-98...), in the play of revealing the artist, one will discover a bit better yet, in this homogeneous sphere, how great is Pascal Dusapin's need to come back to the form, (re)work the musical objects and take them down different paths, making them ever more precise, letting them be crossed by influences or inspirations that are sometimes explicit, derived from popular idioms or natural acoustic manifestations, and often associating a gravity with the quartet that is also to be heard elsewhere, in particular the choral works. He embraces the genre in its possibilities and diver-

sity: the playing times (from 8 to 35 minutes), the layout (from single movement to the 24 divisions of *Time Zones*), form (there is not one score that does not impose, from the very first bars, a listening direction) and, quite simply, the richness of these multiple strings. As we learnt beginning with his first works, Pascal Dusapin loves the *Instrument* and enjoys exploring its resources, techniques and registers, exacerbating its sound potential and thereby wary of any cerebral excess. The elements of his language, expounded as of the Eighties (trills, quartertones, *glissandi*...), thus find their place in his compositions of the 1990s and first decade of this century, further characterised by immediately recognisable sound figures (the incredible *pizzicato* opening of *Quartet V*, the initial unison of *IV*, these successive *agitato* entries in *III*...). Differently and less obstinately displayed or, on the contrary, developed like syncretic complexes, these elements, closely associated with contrasting atmospheres, are the basis for a free, identifiable style: a demanding identity, which is powerfully revealed by listening to these six opuses.

Of the five quartets, only the second bears a title; it is by far the longest as well as the one with the most explicit programme. *Time Zones*, a fascinating collection of 24 short moments—*Time Zone 16*, the briefest, consists of only 14 bars—, sometimes linked, elsewhere separated by a simple breath mark, stands out in the composer's production, crossing the genre and, at the same time, going beyond it with its project. It is a first assessment of the 1980s, marked by an intense overlapping of the composer's strictly musical preoccupations and his

simultaneous attraction for conceptual and minimalist arts, American in particular. Begun in New York in October 1988 and completed in February 1990 during his stay at the American Foundation in La Napoule on the French Riviera, we also find, after the double bar of the end, an excerpt from Samuel Beckett's *Mercier and Camier*<sup>6</sup>:

*'Finally Mercier said:*

*I don't think I can go much further.*

*So soon? said Camier. What is it? The legs? The feet? The head rather, said Mercier.'*

Quoted deliberately, these few phrases represent a troubling avowal coming from a composer barely thirty-five years old who, moreover, had just had his first opera<sup>7</sup> premiered. It is not so much that the musical matter for pursuing might lack, but it is indeed the project that finds its point of fulfilment, organically closing in on itself. Whilst Beckett is regularly summoned by Dusapin throughout his oeuvre in general—as attested to by titles, quotations and epigraphs<sup>8</sup> and, even more recently, *Echo's Bones*, for soprano, clarinet and piano, composed on five poems by the Irish writer—, he is systematically 'present' in the string quartets starting with *Time Zones*<sup>9</sup>. Mercier and Camier themselves return in *Quartet V* to continue their dialogue begun with *Time Zones*, to the point that this can also be viewed as an intimate interrogation of the composer, a memory of this avowal inscribed at the end of his Second Quartet, an interrogation masked by a 'dramaturgical' gesture. Bar 1, on the staff, Camier and Mercier question each other once again, fifteen years later: *'Where do we start, said Camier. We start, Mercier replied.'* Here we go! Further on, the

composer confides a few qualms, 'One would say that you're choking, he said. If you have something to say, say it. // I was in fact going to say something, said Mercier. But on reflection, I'm putting it aside' (bars 139 and 144), or amuses himself with technical remarks: 'Don't you find it a bit fast, said Camier. Yes, it is a bit fast, but we won't manage to decide to go less quickly, replied Camier' (bar 269). Finally, at the last bar, he reveals his search more precisely: 'What are we looking for? A strange form, said Camier. What's a strange form? I don't know, but it keeps us very busy, replied Camier. Yes, it keeps us very busy, said Mercier...' Here his intention is revealed: finding a form that is different every time, strange if not totally original. Finding a form for this quartet so weighted down by its own history, and whose very sound sometimes dominates the singularity of the writing.

*Time Zones* is a pivotal event: although it takes inspiration from the first two endeavours, from the *Trio* and *Quartet I*, it is to throw them into a sort of prehistory with an austere, energetic horizon. The young man in a hurry turns into a surveyor, carrying out a vast chrono-topographical plotting, equipped with logbooks (his stays in New York, Tokyo, Paris, São Paulo, The Hague, La Napoule and Montpellier are indicated in the score) and preceded by a strong temporal concept<sup>10</sup>; the 24 pieces, whose final assemblage defies the strict chronology of the writing, offer the listener a journey of rare intensity. From the opening bars by the solo violin, *dolce*, to the concluding *furioso*, which sets the last four time zones (21-24), Dusapin doubles the invention with an innate sense of proportion and balance. There

are extraordinary risks in *Time Zones*, amazing successions of density, weight and lighting or perspectives. The pieces for solo violin (*Time Zones 8* and *13*), of which the latter, dedicated to Luigi Nono, witnesses Beckett's first, ironic appearance ('That should change everything, said Camier, but it will change nothing'), the fierce one for cello (*Time Zone 20*, which opens with these words: 'How do you feel today? said Camier / I feel weak but determined, said Mercier. And you' to conclude with 'He didn't hurt you too badly, I hope? said Mercier / - What a bastard, said Camier'), create in this luxuriant progression the bridges from one edifice to another, in which singular sound batteries are deployed: crystalline *glissando* chords (*Time Zone 3*), interlaced trills (*Time Zone 4*), retro effects (*Time Zone 5*), *pizzicati* (*Time Zone 6*), slowed-down areas, blank chords (*Time Zone 7*), *largo* (*Time Zone 9*), and barely audible (*Time Zone 13*)... Here are heard different sound constructions which the later Quartets will organize differently according to their own projects, in a more sensual way maybe. Since its outstanding premiere, in the autumn of 1990, *Time Zones* has revealed another dimension of the quartet as conceived by Pascal Dusapin. In it, he combines his musical, literary and plastic attractions. The 25-year-old composer who was brilliantly trying his hand at giving the so-classic string trio and quartet their telluric forces definitively makes room for an author with a much broader gesture.

Having gone through this initiatory journey, the route, punctuated by this intimate conversation with Samuel Beckett, is open. Pascal Dusapin can come back to the string quartet without any project other

than this one, and without wanting to twist it at all costs, either; *Quartets III, IV and V* are three successful outcomes of this. From *Quartet III*, a marking found at the very beginning of part III sheds light on a new spirit: 'seek a simple sound, open and resonant'. This extraordinary moment of music and its keen, meditative tranquillity, in which harmony, shifting blend and tiling in a play of gentle tensions, reveals a perfectly original, straightforward space, whose complexity does not encroach upon perception. It is a new relation that is established, confirming in the later quartets the composer's capacity for finding the quality of his intention within the quartet itself, for music itself. It is this strange form to which Mercier and Camier aspired and which henceforth emerges from every work. A form that the listener is invited to follow attentively and often with astonishment, a form directed, regardless of its path, by an authentic independence of tone.

Antoine Gindt, September 2009

Translated by John Tyler Tuttle

- 1 *Hinterland*, the sixth in the highly particular concerto form (premiere in Lucerne on 28 April 2010 by the Arditti Quartet and the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Jonathan Nott), and *Open Time*, the seventh: 21 variations for string quartet (premiere at the Cité de la Musique in Paris, on 16 January 2010 by the Arditti Quartet).
- 2 As Harry Halbreich pointed out in the leaflet accompanying the first recordings of the *Trio* and *Quartet I*, dating from 1984, already by the Arditti Quartet (Harmonia Mundi, MFA).
- 3 The Arditti Quartet previously recorded the *Trio* and *Quartets I* (1<sup>st</sup> version), *II* and *III* in various disc releases.
- 4 Pascal Dusapin alludes to the absence of 'strategy' regarding his operas; Antoine Gindt: 'Pascal Dusapin, l'art de ne pas se retourner' in *Musica*, Festival International des Musiques d'aujourd'hui, Strasbourg, 2008.
- 5 Here I am referring to the first performance, which followed shortly after the writing of the works.
- 6 *Mercier and Camier*, Samuel Beckett's first novel in French, written in 1946, translated into English in 1974.
- 7 *Roméo & Juliette* was premiered in Montpellier on 12 July 1989 (*Time Zone 12* is dated 21 July).
- 8 *Watt*, for trombone and orchestra (1994), *Quad*, for violin and ensemble (1996).
- 9 Through the intermediary of Gilles Deleuze (regarding Samuel Beckett's *Quad*) in *Quartet III*, Murphy quoted at the end of *Quartet IV*, *Mercier et Camier* in *Quartet V*.
- 10 Pascal Dusapin says that he 'almost never think[s] about time. For me, time is a philosophical notion that I learnt to broach because I was asked questions on this notion.' *Domaine secret*, interview with Antoine Gindt, in *Cité musiques*, la 'Revue de la cité de la Musique', no. 59, Paris, January-April 2009.