Henri Dutilleux: Music - Mystery and Memory

Roger Nichols

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Conversations with Claude Glayman

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I

HENRI DUTILLEUX: I was born on 22 January 1916 in Angers. I was three when my family left the town in 1919 to go back to northern France, which had suffered severely in the war. A three-year-old can be affected by certain images that live within him like memories.

My mother and her other children had been taken in by her brother, Julien Koszul, and his wife in Angers. When I was born, my father was at Verdun.

So it was not until three years later that we could go back to Douai, to find three-quarters of the town destroyed and my parents' house completely ransacked. My father was a printer and bookseller and his printing works involved elements of craftsmanship that were fascinating. It turned out lithographs as well as type, and all kinds of material, especially for the mines that made up a large part of the industry of the area.

After living in the Anjou region, to come to this industrial one was a striking change, with the landscape marked by strange pyramids lining the horizon – the slagheaps left over once the coal had been extracted.

CLAUDE GLAYMAN: *Is there one particular memory you still have of Angers?*

HD: There are images which blend with several others from my early childhood, so it's difficult to separate them: first of all the family house belonging to the uncle and aunt who had taken us in, right out in the country, then the move to the north, the long train journey and a little song my mother was humming and which she got me to repeat.

CG: *Music already.*

HD: Yes, but also sadness at leaving that house. In any case these memories are mixed up with later ones because we went back to Angers several times for holidays, six or eight years later, for example: as a result, more recently I found myself instinctively returning to this region.

CG: *You're thinking of your present house in the country?*

HD: It's about 60 kilometres from Angers, at Candes-Saint-Martin in the Touraine, on the very tip of the point where the Loire and the Vienne meet. It's a very fine sight, the two rivers joining each other just opposite the house – so attractive, indeed, that I've turned my worktable to face the other way, looking out on the church and the slate roofs, so as not to be distracted by the arrival of a heron on the sandbank or by a flight of wild geese way up in the sky.

CG: *Is there a link between your choice of this place and being born in Angers?*

HD: Various things came together. To begin with, I remained attached to this region, and in particular I had a great friend there, the playwright André Obey – dead now, alas – who came to live at Montsoreau, a kilometre from Candes. Before that he had lived in another house at Champtoceaux, some way downstream from Ancenis, and my wife and I used to enjoy going for brief stays with André and his wife Josie. There was a whole group of actors and theatre people there, including Jean-Louis Barrault, Pierre Dux, Pierre Blanchar, Rosy Varte, Marie-Hélène Dasté – 'Maiène' – that amazing lady who, as you know, was the daughter of Jacques Copeau and who was still acting and making foreign tours. Someone I admire immensely.

I learnt a lot from these surroundings and I have vivid memories of André Obey, who was the most profoundly musical of all the playwrights of his time and was himself a pianist. He had been a close acquaintance of Stravinsky and Ravel. After the Liberation, he was for some time the administrator of the Comédie-Française, but my interest is rather in him as a playwright. Some of his plays are more often produced abroad than in France, such as *Noë*, *L'Homme de cendres*, *Une Fille pour du vent*, *Loire*, *Revenu de l'étoile*, *Lazare* and *Le Viol de Lucrèce*, from which Britten took the libretto for his opera *The Rape of Lucretia*. An 'Association d'Amis d'André Obey' has been set up to make his work better known. Between the wars he published a very fine novel which won him the Prix Théophraste-Renaudot, *Le Joueur de triangle*. It was autobiographical because he had been the triangle player in the orchestra of the Concerts Populaires in Douai, as I was to be twenty years later. I reread it some time ago and found in it a whole portion of my youth, which we were talking about just now.

My friendship with André Obey did not really begin until about 1945, when he asked me to write incidental music for a production at the Comédie-Française of *La Princesse d'Elide*, Molière's *comédie-ballet*, which had originally had music by Lully. On this occasion Jean-Louis Barrault was in charge of the musical interludes, as well as playing a role in the play. In his view the original music, which was very pompous and heavy, would have created a sort of hiatus within the liveliness of the new production; that was why he felt it was necessary to commission a contemporary composer who would dare to risk taking Lully's place. This audacity was happily accepted by the critics, but less so two years later when I wrote new incidental music for *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*. Obliterating Lully twice in such a short time was too much for an almost unknown young composer, and there were cries of 'Scandal!' On the other hand, Roland-Manuel[1] defended me in a very enthusiastic article in *Combat*. Of course these pieces of incidental music, being narrowly functional, could not yet be regarded as being in my own true language. At the time I was working for French radio and was in charge of what were loosely called 'Musical Illustrations'. I like the theatre and the contact with theatre people.

So that was when I got to know Jean-Louis Barrault. I saw him a little later, at the time of the Domaine Musical, but after that hardly at all. He said he was very keen on working with me again, but times had changed.

CG: *Barrault had a certain musical taste: it was he who started Boulez on his career!*

HD: Barrault's tastes at the time drew him rather towards composers like Honegger – he had been the reciter in Honegger's *La Danse des morts*. I remember being at the premiere during the Occupation. As for Boulez, if he turned to him it was no doubt through simple intuition, or through Honegger and Désormière. The latter had a high opinion of Boulez.

CG: *Music always played an active part in Barrault's productions.*

HD: One thinks obviously of Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin*, which was put on with music by Honegger.

CG: *And, as I say, it was Barrault who gave Boulez his first foot on the ladder.*

HD: Yes, and one remembers that in the Théâtre Marigny Boulez often used to play the ondes Martenot. As time went on he was asked to conduct the ensembles for the incidental music. That life of the theatre and contact with actors, it's very exciting. I have very happy memories of working at the Comédie-Française and of my warm welcome from André Jolivet, who was then the company's music director. Apart from Barrault's gifts as a producer and actor, he was also an excellent choreographer and mime, and just being near him was stimulating! He had a great feeling for music and he encouraged it by his irresistible enthusiasm. At least that was true of my score for *La Princesse d'Elide*. Nadia Boulanger and Roland-Manuel urged me to make extracts from it for the concert hall, but I felt I could not dissociate the music from the stage action.

THE PORTRAIT OF CHOPIN

CG: *Let's go back to your beginnings. You had brothers and sisters.*

HD: There were five of us, but we lost a little sister when she was very young. I had two sisters and a brother. I was the youngest. In the house in Douai there was always a lot of work going on and everybody got up very early. The house was full of music. My elder sister, Hélène, learnt the violin and played it well in fact. My other sister, Paulette, was a gifted pianist, as my mother had been. My brother, Paul, played the cello. My father played the violin as an amateur, but at one time he had thought of earning his living through music. As he was a printer, his work often meant that, even with my mother's considerable help, he had to extend his hours until 11p.m. or midnight. When they did have some free time, they used to practise sonatas – in those days the ones by Franck, Lekeu, Fauré, Pierné and even Debussy. But as well as music, the house was also full of paintings.

CG: *Which brings us to your great-grandfather on your father's side, Constant Dutilleux.*

HD: Constant Dutilleux belonged to the generation of Berlioz and Chopin, to cite two great names. He was born in 1807 and died in 1865. He was a man of great independence of mind and an extremely interesting personality. He owned a lithography business in Arras, but painted in his spare time. I cannot imagine how he was able to produce so much in this field, because while some of his paintings are well known, including some very beautiful ones, he also left a mass of drawings, in pencil, charcoal and red chalk, which seem to me even more remarkable.

The family possesses a speech delivered by him when he was received by the academy in Arras, and it displays a mind of rare quality. As a boy, when he was a pupil at a religious college and himself a firm believer, he had already shown fierce independence when he refused to produce the certificate of confession needed in those days before you could pass examinations. That was in 1825, under the second Restoration, and he promptly left the royal college without completing his year of philosophy.

CG: *Did he sell his own pictures commercially?*

HD: Yes, he sold a few, and thanks to his small business in Arras he was also able to buy some, and that's how he acquired some paintings by Delacroix at a time when that painter was not widely recognized. Not everybody had the intuitive genius of Baudelaire, who continually supported him in his articles. As for Corot, he bought from him a picture which is still in the family and which has an interesting story attached to it. It dates from 1846 or 1847. Constant Dutilleux wrote a letter to Corot which was initially read by his father. He was amazed that a painter in the provinces should be interested in his son's work, which at the time was little known. Corot offered my great-grandfather the choice of two pictures, one showing the pools at Ville-d'Avray, which Corot often painted. This was the one my great-grandfather chose, and since then every generation of the family has promised not to part with it to anyone. In fact, it was from their deal over this painting that Corot and Constant Dutilleux became close friends, right up until the latter's death. Indeed Corot made a journey to be present at his funeral in Arras.

CG: *Are any of Constant Dutilleux's paintings on view?*

HD: Several exhibitions of his work have been held, notably in Arras in 1965, for the centenary of his death, and again quite recently in Douai and Arras. Two of his pictures are in the Louvre. Others are to be seen in museums in Lille and Arras. There's even one in the museum in Philadelphia. But most of them are in private collections. The paintings of his I prefer are those in which he takes a different line from Corot, for example this landscape here, this striking sunset, like something on fire. It's already quite close to Théodore Rousseau. In general he belonged to

the group of landscape painters attached to the Barbizon school and his name is often mentioned in that context, referring to his discovery of a particular 'glass plate' reproduction process used by Corot himself.

Delacroix had a high opinion of him and mentions him several times in his diary. My family used to possess nineteen letters written to him by Delacroix, but now we only have copies. Delacroix asked him to help with the frescoes in Saint-Sulpice, but he was busy with his lithography in Arras and had to decline.

CG: *Does this enthusiasm for Constant Dutilleux lie, albeit indirectly, behind your interest in painting in general?*

HD: Very probably, but I wanted to get to know other painters who came after him. When I discovered the Impressionists, for me that was a revelation, I was totally dazzled. Later some of the painters of the Cubist period, like Braque and Picasso, intrigued me. Intrigued me rather than really fascinated me. It wasn't until the revelation of certain abstract paintings (by Kandinsky, for example) that I again felt, some time later and in a different way, an exaltation comparable to the one produced by Impressionism in my youth.

CG: *There was painting, then, on your father's side; was your mother's side important too?*

HD: Very much so. There I'm speaking of my maternal grandfather, Julien Koszul, whom I remember. His grandfather was Polish and the family settled in Alsace. I was eleven when he died and he lived with my parents after a long spell as director of the Roubaix Conservatoire. He had been a pupil at the Niedermeyer School with Fauré and Gigout and he was a talented composer and organist. He had benefited from the excellent teaching at the Niedermeyer School, where special emphasis was placed on the study of Gregorian chant, whereas at the Paris Conservatoire at the same period it was completely ignored. This explains a certain modal colour and certain melodic curves in Fauré's music that are the essence of his style. Julien Koszul was a close friend of Fauré and exchanged numerous letters with him in their youth. I still have some of them – in parts they're very amusing.

CG: *If he died when you were eleven, that must have been in 1927, and Fauré himself died in 1924.*

HD: I remember very well how distraught he was, the day he learnt of Fauré's death. After that he kept Fauré's last letter to him on his desk for a long time. On another occasion he spoke to us about Schumann, whom he had seen when he was very young, during a visit to Germany.

CG: *Was Julien Koszul a strong personality?*

HD: As director of the Roubaix Conservatoire, he had great authority, and until quite recently you could still meet people who had known him.

CG: *He was the one, wasn't he, who took an interest in Albert Roussel, encouraging his early efforts and sending him to Gigout? Did you make any attempts later to get to know Roussel?*

HD: No, I never knew him: I was still very young, studying at the Conservatoire, and he died in 1937. I know my mother went to see him but she didn't really like to say to him that I wanted to be a composer. She deliberately kept quiet about that. My grandfather had been astute enough to discover in Roussel gifts that were not necessarily apparent in his earliest works, where the writing is rather ungainly. There, you cannot yet tell that this ungainliness would, paradoxically, become one of the main elements of his style. This contributed to his success in expressing himself, on the harmonic and melodic fronts, in a quite different manner from his contemporaries in the Fauré/Ravel school. It makes me think of Cocteau's saying in *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*: 'Whatever the public reproaches you with, cultivate it, it's you.' You could apply that to Roussel.

CG: *A great-grandfather a painter, a grandfather a musician – quite a galaxy of good fairies around your cradle!*

HD: Literature, on the other hand, was less of a presence in my family. But one of my uncles, André Koszul, was nonetheless a well-known translator of Shakespeare and also of Shelley. He played some small part in my discovery of Shakespeare.

CG: *Did all these influences have an effect on you?*

HD: Yes, I've often felt them, in music and in painting. But if I've followed the path of music, that is because of the intelligence of those around me and especially of my parents, who first of all took advice from many sources and then encouraged me wholeheartedly.

CG: *And you started to study music seriously by attending the lycée at the same time as the Douai Conservatoire?*

HD: Yes, it meant going from one school to the other, and this entailed some extraordinary acrobatics because one lesson followed hard on the heels of another with no let-up. We had a lesson in *solfège* at 6.30 a.m. No sooner were we out of that than we had to get to the *lycée*, then we left that to go to a piano lesson between 12.30 and 2.00, then back to the *lycée*!

CG: *Did world events concern you?*

HD: There was constant talk about the First World War, and the period between the wars, with the threat of a new conflict, was a very short period. From 1919, when we returned to the north, to 1938–39, war was a permanent topic, and even before 1933, when Hitler took power, we were expecting a new clash with Germany and blaming it largely on the Treaty of Versailles.

CG: *Were the origins of your mother's family in any way linked with the immigration of Poles into northern France?*

HD: Not at all. That immigration was tied in with the problem of manpower, especially in the coalmines, which are no longer in operation, and that working-class population, one must say, integrated itself admirably. Our Polish origins have nothing to do with that, but it is true that I have sometimes experienced this faint Slavic ancestry as, shall I say, a kind of nostalgia.

CG: *Do you think that this ancestry has had any effect on your music?*

HD: I've wondered about that.

CG: *Unless I'm mistaken, your great-grandfather Constant Dutilleux owned one of the portraits of Chopin by Delacroix.*

HD: It's a curious story, linked to the fact that Constant Dutilleux's family was relatively large. When he died in 1865, the problems to do with the inheritance were shelved, and were settled only after the war of 1870. I have found a little catalogue from this period in which, among other pictures by Delacroix and also by Corot, the portrait of Chopin is mentioned.

CG: *The strange thing is that your great-grandfather possessed the famous portrait of Chopin by Delacroix and that you have a Polish ancestor.*

HD: From the 1870s on, no one knows what happened to this portrait, until the moment when Marmontel acquired it and donated it to the Louvre. Even my father knew nothing of its history. He knew the family had parted with several works by Delacroix and was not only mortified but scandalized. But it was I who discovered, after my father's death, that the finest Chopin portrait had belonged to Constant Dutilleux!

CG: *Reading some of Delacroix's diary, I find he had a great interest in music.*

HD: His opinions about music were often copied from those of Chopin, from his conversations with Chopin. That alone makes them interesting. In the same way, he had considerable reservations about Berlioz: again the Chopin influence.

As for his diary, I read it and reread it continually. I remember devoting a series of radio broadcasts to it. It's thinking at a high level, and formed an indispensable part of his life.

AN ANXIOUS CHILD

CG: *To return to the Twenties, you're attending the* lycée *and the Conservatoire. Do you have memories of the aesthetic and intellectual climate of the time? For instance, were people around you interested in Les Six?*

HD: No, not really. You know, my mind was mainly on my studies. I had a really remarkable teacher for harmony and counterpoint, Victor Gallois, who was the director of the Douai Conservatoire. He was an expert in counterpoint. He won the Prix de Rome in 1905, the year Ravel was not even allowed to proceed to the final round, which explains why this modest, reserved man composed so little subsequently. He was very conscious of the fact that the jury of the Institute had brought disgrace on themselves, as they had in previous years, by refusing to recognize genius. It's not a comfortable position to be in, to win the Prix de Rome the year they refuse it to Ravel; and, as you know, it caused a scandal and the Conservatoire director at the time, Théodore Dubois, had to resign. My own reservations about the Institute and officialdom in general stem partly from that. You'll say that I should have thought of that earlier, given that I myself won the Prix de Rome!

Talking of Victor Gallois, I remember the stand he made one day when a teaching inspector criticized him for putting Ravel's *Bolero* into one of his concerts: 'How can you conduct that tawdry stuff?' – 'Quite easily! And the pupils in my piano classes are also working on the *Sonatine*.'

CG: *Ravel's early cantatas are fairly academic, all the same.*

HD: It's not yet the real Ravel, and at times you find echoes of Borodin, and some elements of Chabrier that are very attractive, I have to say. Was it deliberate, as a concession to the examination jury, or was it unconscious? If you think that he had already written *Jeux d'eau* and the String Quartet! I'm not sure Ravel would have approved this kind of exhumation. We can regard these three cantatas as documentary material, no more than that. We are familiar with the real Ravel.

CG: *Do you remember the cultural climate of the years 1925–30? You were young, between ten and fourteen, you were at school and learning piano, harmony and counterpoint.*

HD: There weren't many records and I'm not sure the radio was an important factor. We played music rather than listening to it. There were concerts in which