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**Christian Steulet: There are various way of doing a composer portrait. We have decided on the principle of the interview, starting from a question common to everybody: What do you feel when you confront a blank sheet of paper?**

Sylvie Courvoisier: Sometimes I experience a pang of fear at a blank sheet, but only when I have a commission, like for the singer Stéphanie Burkart. In such a case, I just try to do my work like a craftsman, something like a carpenter cutting wood. Facing a blank page, I don't feel like an artist at all. Generally the first thing I do, if it's a piece for orchestra, is to rule the staves. This is the way I try to hear the different instruments, situate the motifs and make a general plan of the work's structure. But basically, my approach varies with everything I compose; I don't have a specific technique. Sometimes I start with scenarios full of imagery, sometimes with purely musical themes, motifs that I develop, invert, or whatever.

**Ch. S.: You began writing songs at a very early stage. Is composing something you feel as an inner need?**

S. C. : Yes, I believe it is. Many children feel a need to draw; others want to model clay. I just felt the urge to write little tunes; I would write out little notes forwards or backwards. I still have some of these, by the way. When I was fourteen, I loved Baudelaire and wrote little pieces that I called 'Spleen'. It was fun.

**Ch. S.: Is composing a part of your daily routine?**

S. C. : Yes, I try to compose a little every day. It may be anything: two or three measures, a few words, a sketch of sound effects on strings against the background of a melody to be developed. Everything gets noted down in my music notebook. I use it to collect ideas for later on, when I find myself in front of that blank sheet. I find I can use a lot of things, very often for the transitions in my pieces. I don't 'peck out' ideas; it's more like recycling methods or processes. Right now, for example, I'm working a lot on chords in polytonality and different tempi. I'm trying to analyze how it all works. As I have never done any formal studies in composition, I often listen to contemporary music while reading the score.

**Ch. S.: At what moment does the actual writing of music take place in this working process?**

S. C. : It varies quite a bit, but I would say that, at first, the extra-musical elements are a very important factor. Of course I may compose my more 'intellectual' pieces by starting from a purely musical motif. But when the point of departure is a text, for example, I work in a different way. I ask the author to send me a tape cassette. I need to hear the text spoken. I listen to it while on a walk outdoors, then I go back home and try to link the syllables to intervals, or the phonemes to a note. I define my own rules, very strict ones, and afterwards I break them. That's how I wrote 'Balbutiements' (Stammerings) I and II.

**Ch. S.: At the beginning of your career you worked in the jazz scene. Has jazz influenced your composing in any way?**

S. C. : I've always liked jazz, or rather improvised music, and still do. As I also like contemporary music very much, I've always been a little torn between the two. My first recording was more in the direction of jazz, and it's true that I've moved further and further away from jazz in my current works . But I don't care for labels. There will certainly be a moment in my compositions where there's a basic line connecting to jazz. Actually, jazz lives from improvisation; it has helped me develop this instinctive side of musical activity. When you play improvised music, instantaneous composing is what's really going on. Every improviser is a composer, and in a way the work of composing itself is an improvisation, but of course one that's slower, more thought over and revised.

**Ch. S.: What about all your interactions with other musicians and the public? Do they have a great impact on your composing?**

S. C. : It's hard to say. I've never tried to write down an improvisation. To improvise well, you have to forget everything; so to compose well, you have to forget everything, too. Paradoxical, isn't it? When I'm improvising, I like to develop the music as if I were composing a piece of music. Some improvisations are impossible to write down and they're magnificent. I often combine purely 'written' elements with improvisation. Even when I decide to compose something for a chamber orchestra, I like to leave some windows open for improvisation on the part of the orchestra musicians.

### **Ch. S.: How do you submit your scores to the musicians?**

S. C. : When I give the scores to the musicians at Ocre, I often tell them a story. I ask them to try and imagine a village, or play along with a puff of air or just follow the directions for improvisation. Everything is very detailed and organized. It's different when I give concerts that are totally free, like in a quartet with Fred Frith, Lucas Niggli and Urs Leimgruber, or a duo with Fred Frith or Jacques Demierre. There, absolutely nothing is defined before we play. We just close our eyes and away we go!

### **Ch. S.: How long-lived do you consider your works to be?**

S. C. : I've kept some of my very first pieces, and everything I've written since 1988. Sometimes I play them again or recycle some parts. When I look at my first works again today, I see that it was a young girl who composed them and they're funny and full of energy. In this way I can also think of my work as something in progress, something that can be measured as I grow older. Today I'm perhaps more conscious of what I write, musically speaking. Before, I didn't really think about the chords I used. The older I get, the slower I write. My next piece for orchestra, for example, will probably take me about six months, working every day. That's very slow, but I really have to be able to understand what I'm doing, and I refer more and more to the past, to the work of great composers.

### **Ch. S.: Is it that you're taking more time to think about the crystallization of the work?**

S. C. : I think so. Sometimes I compose very quickly, instinctively, to the point of not being conscious of what I'm doing. If you're writing ten pages of music a day, a sort of intoxication sets in, like when you're improvising. But then, it takes weeks to re-work everything, making the choice between what's necessary and what's not. To compose well is to attain a high level of consciousness of what you're doing, to know why every note is there.

### **Ch. S.: Has your method of composing changed in any way since you've been living in New York?**

S. C. : It has made me a lot more rigorous. I've learned to analyze a score more quickly. Sometimes I'm given a complicated piece that I have to master by the next day. I have a very good teacher of classical music, David Oei, who is a real master of chamber music. I've plunged into Beethoven and Rachmaninoff again. It's such a pleasure to realize how Beethoven succeeds in developing a motif in an incredible way, using arpeggios with such simplicity. I'm trying to

understand the 'means' he uses to control the continuity from one note to another. This has given me a lot of ideas and has helped me develop not only my composing but my improvising as well. Musical geniuses like Bach were also excellent improvisers.

### **Ch. S.: Do you make your living by composing or by giving concerts?**

S. C. : Both are pretty much of equal importance. I also have to go on tour to make ends meet. This year (1999) will be different because I've received a great number of commissions. I shall be staying at home more. Besides the commission for orchestra that I'm working on now, I have five others to finish: one piece for voice and piano, another for voice and tuba, a 'Balbutiement III' as well as the new pieces for the barrel organ, considering the fact that I'm going to make a new CD with 'Ocre' in trio formation. That said, I also like to go on tour, but not too much. I try to make choices that leave me enough time to develop my compositions.

### **Ch. S.: What are your personal projects at the moment (December 1998)?**

S. C. : I'm working on a duo with Mark Feldman that will be a joint composition. In view of the fact that we do an enormous amount of work together and that half of it is jazz, I only have to write definitive scores for an orchestra or a female voice. I provide sketches and ideas, and then we try and see how to play them together. The result is in perpetual evolution, and we never stop recording what we do. There's also 'Ocre'. This was originally a trio consisting of organ, piano and tuba, at the centre of which was a barrel organ. But in fact I write more for Pierre Charial than for the organ. I show up with some sketches in my notebook, and we spend weeks with them in the studio, trying to reduce and hammer them out. This is really handicraft in the literal sense, taking time and letting us have our fill of imagination. I start by writing something down on paper alone, trying to make windows for the group to improvise in, but all the notes are written down for the organ. This is like writing for an orchestra; it's very entertaining. 'Ocre' is an orchestra with a variable geometry; the largest ensemble was set up for the show 'Ocre de barbarie' at the Vidy theatre in Lausanne.

### **Ch. S.: Are dreams important in the composing process?**

S. C. : Yes, they are. When you're writing music every day and really immersed in your work, dreams become an important element. That's why I love living in New York; I'm very alone there. I find myself seeing only one person all week long, and I get very few

phone calls. When I'm composing every day in New York, I end up dreaming about the music I'm writing. In the dream I hear motifs and directions, so I get up during the night and write them down. This often happens when I'm pressed to meet deadlines. It's not always agreeable for the people around you, because it shows a bit of an autistic side, perhaps.

### **Ch. S.: What other extra-musical elements are important to you?**

S. C. : I recently saw a film by Theo Angelopoulos, 'Le Regard d'Ulysse' (Ulysses' Gaze), that I liked very much. I then composed a piece with these images in my mind. Obviously there are some emotional states that play an important role, bits of simple humour or sadness that make one compose something that's sometimes totally different. I've also worked with dancers, but only once, and for the theatre. It was for a text by Jacques Probst entitled 'Où vas-tu, Judith?' (Where Are You Going, Judith?). It's a superb text, for which I used a quartet doing total improvisation. It was recorded on the radio, where there were a great number of written things - but once is not the same as always. I really like to work on texts; they let me go to a place that's completely somewhere else. The result is very different, even if I also try to incorporate improvisation into it. When it's something written, Fred Frith always asks me what I want and which direction I want to improvise in. I'm very fond of working by combining one or two musicians who improvise on a score that has succeeded very well. I've also used Fred Frith as a soloist and improviser specifically in a composition of mine for orchestra. Generally I will not ask a musician to improvise on the strict basis of an agreement, but rather to invent what cannot be written: sounds, sound effects, grating, the clanking of chains falling on the guitar - all sorts of things that I hear but cannot write down. I always try to integrate other elements in the piece I'm composing in addition to the 'traditional' musical notation.

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