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# Never to be naught

IAN PACE explores the exciting, engaging and evolving world of Pascal Dusapin

PASCAL DUSAPIN is to some extent an outsider, even within his home country of France. His work stands apart from the French mainstream, as epitomised by Boulez and the spectralists, not to mention more conservative figures such as Phillipe Manoury. Performances of his music in Britain have been sporadic, so the forthcoming feature of his work at the Huddersfield Festival provides an important opportunity to assess his career to date.

Dusapin's work has transformed itself frequently since his earliest acknowledged compositions, yet certain recurrent preoccupations can be discerned. An interest in instrumental virtuosity is often present, as is the influence of jazz. However, though he was himself once a jazz pianist, Dusapin has steadfastly refused to write for the piano, until this year, when he composed a piano trio, and has never used percussion instruments other than timpani (though he often gives them highly prominent roles in orchestral works). He is also concerned with a score as a visual entity, so that a cursory glance at the page can reveal, through graphic features, something of how the piece sounds, as in *Assai* (1981) for orchestra (ex.1). But more important is his interest in exploring new types of structures; they might better be called narratives, for even (or perhaps more so) in the longer non-operatic works, one can sometimes sense that some underlying psychological trajectory or ideological conception is being explored.

If one might speak of Dusapin's 'style', however, it is hardly something that is self-consciously cultivated. He is essentially a pragmatist; his works are a response to particular circumstances and players, in particular the members of the Strasbourg-based ensemble Accroche Note, who have premiered a great many pieces. The influence of the clarinetist Armand Angster may have been a major reason for the central role the clarinet plays in so much of Dusapin's music. His vocal idioms demonstrate a real concern for the particular modes of inflection of the different languages he uses, which include French, German, English, Japanese, and the provincial language of Occitan. He is also fascinated by word games, as demonstrated in his ongoing series of solo pieces, the title of each of which begins with the letter 'I' (e.g. *If* (1984) for clarinet, which the accompanying note describes as having 'une energie incroyable, féroce et joyeuse!'; *Ici* (1986) for flute,

*Indeed* (1987) for trombone; and *In & out* (1989) for double bass). The meaning(s) of the titles provide the initial inspiration for the works, which are then predicated in part on the implications contained therein.

WHILST one might today talk of a whole international 'school' of composers who have built upon the work of Iannis Xenakis (such as Ivo Malec, Julio Estrada, Francisco Guerrero, Richard Barrett and Chris Dench, to name but a few), Dusapin is the only composer who Xenakis acknowledges as his student. From Xenakis, Dusapin derived an understanding of the architecture of sound-masses and an interest in mythical subjects. The earlier works, such as the remarkable *La rivière* (1979–80) for orchestra, demonstrate the influence of the older figure in the dense, sprawling orchestral terrain that is presented. Yet this is not the whole story: there are occasional glimpses of more recognisably French harmony and orchestration, and Dusapin leads the music towards a huge climax that resembles a deranged version of an equivalent moment in a late romantic work. Over the course of the work, an increasing focus on gesture moves the piece beyond its initially predominant emphasis on pure texture. Even more impressive is *Laven* (1980–81) for flute and orchestra, which sees Dusapin responding to the impassioned nature of Xenakis. Here a initially free and improvisatory flute part is contrasted with the monolithic sonorities of the orchestra. Towards the end the flute begins to provoke some reactions from the orchestra, but this process is soon thwarted by a hammer-like blow. Perhaps the most important of Dusapin's early works, however is *Fist* (1982) for eight players, which, like the earlier *Musique captive* (1980) for nine winds, creates a searing and exhilarating music that resembles a form of free jazz, albeit carefully controlled and consequently energised. This work hints in various places at an openness to tonality, ending as it does on a B $\flat$  second inversion, with added eleventh and flattened thirteenth.

Through the sheer directness of their musical material, these works have an immediacy of impact. But in *Hop* (1983–84) for four groups of three players, Dusapin began to concentrate to a greater extent on audible processes and delineation of sections. The medium concerned allows for much antiphonal

Ex. 1: from *Assai* (© Salabert and reproduced by kind permission of UMP)

contrast, whilst there is a general progression from lines constructed from sustained pitches, through more discernible rhythmic patterns, towards chords which coalesce at the end. Whilst the pitches seem initially chosen for their Xenakisite vectorial properties (as was the case in the earlier works), it seems as if at the end harmony is once again coming to the fore. With *Aks* (1987), for mezzo-soprano and seven players, which was commissioned by the Société des Amis du Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Dusapin made his first use of French folk-music, through material provided by the museum and an Occitan lyric. The folk-melody is quoted at the outset, but Dusapin points out that the remainder of the work was created according to processes autonomous to the text. This might seem arbitrary, but the tension between musical and textual narratives enables one to experience each in unforeseen ways. The ensemble, which includes two trumpets and two trombones, seems to create the effect of a jazz band working around folk-melodies.

THE PIVOTAL work for Dusapin was the opera *Roméo et Juliette* (1985–88). Though this was not his first stage work, having been preceded by the very bleak and pessimistic *Niobé (ou le rocher de Sypile)* (1982), it was the piece in which Dusapin first applied properly his many conceptions about narrative to a theatrical medium. The libretto by Olivier Cadot, who had earlier provided the texts for *Mimi* (1987) and *Anacoluthe* (1987), is highly experimental, and divided into nine ‘numbers’. The centre piece of the work is the fifth, entitled ‘La révolution’, for orchestra alone, which was written following the death of Giacinto Scelsi. This richly scored section mirrors the expansiveness of Scelsi’s orchestral writing, but Dusapin tempers the awesome, hallucinatory type of conception associated with Scelsi with an underlying sense of instability and violence that is quite distinct.

The four scenes preceding deal with the first meetings of Roméo and Juliet, who inspires him to incite a revolution in the first number, the ‘Prologue’; they then become like children and the second, third and fourth numbers deal with their subsequent maturing and education. A choir comments upon the main action (as, for example, where their melancholy oscillation between pitches contrasts with the main protagonists’ promises of better things to come), while a quartet of voices serves as a type of intermediary, and in particular teaches them key revolutionary conceptions, such as alienation, money, capital and critique. Roméo and Juliette are also taught to sing by the ‘master singer’ Bill, whose part is completely spoken until the eighth number, when he is seen to be a madman and only then begins to sing. Bill also translates Roméo and Juliette’s words from Shakespeare in the third number into French, and teaches them mathematics; after this and their revolutionary education, they are joined by their doubles, Roméo 2 and Juliette 2, who would seem to represent an expansion of their personalities. All singers and the orchestra finally come into musical correspondence by the end of the fourth number, singing hymns and battle songs.

If the narrative seemed non-linear and problematic in the first half of the work, in the second half it becomes clear that this is not really an operatic plot at all. The sixth number, in which the quartet sing chants and represent the New World Indians, before the heroes arrive, seems relatively straightforward. When they do arrive in the seventh number, the concern shifts to the question of creating a real opera, using all the characters on stage. This number does come close to a conventional operatic set piece, with passionate and lyrical near-tonal lines for Juliette, but soon all dissolves, musically signified by micro-tonal distortion and fragmentation. In the last two numbers, the impossibility of opera, the story and even language itself become increasingly apparent.

In Bill's closing words, 'cette / histoire est facile / à comprendre c'est facile non / c'est lent pour la douleur / ... triste / ridicule / triste / ridicule / admettre / la vérité.'

So *Roméo et Juliette* is as much a comment on the whole nature of opera as an 'opera' itself. It is not all doom, however: the use of a bird-like clarinet solo expanding upon sustained pitches in the choir in the second number, later joined by naturalistic sounds, is quite magical, whilst the domestic comedy between the bickering Roméo and Juliette in the third number seems to owe much to jazz-like inflection and even the music of spirituals. But *Roméo et Juliette*, through its dialectical relationships between text, music, different groups of characters (and the prominence of the clarinet almost makes it into a character itself), narrative and operatic conventions, forces one to rethink the medium. The two main characters are 'decentred' individuals, rather than the autonomous, ubiquitous heroes of the romantic tradition; they are subject to, constructed from and acting upon external determinants. Together with the stage work, that followed, *Medeamaterial* (1991), a monodramatic setting of a Heiner Müller text inspired by Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, *Roméo et Juliette* is one of the most significant creations for the medium of recent years; yet Dusapin does not even get a mention in the *Viking opera guide*.

THE TEXT in the last numbers of *Roméo et Juliette* accords with the later work of Samuel Beckett, the inevitable but impossible desire to find linguistic expression and coherence as a refuge from the horrors of the external world. Dusapin has demonstrated his interest in Beckett in the title of *Hop*, he writes 'Beckett est mort...' on the score of his second string quartet, *Time zones* (1988–90), as Beckett died during its composition, and several of his recent works are explicitly informed by Beckett's texts. The influence of Beckett's ultra-refined later prose may also have been a factor in Dusapin's general thinning out of texture to a greater degree than hitherto, and use of lines with a restricted number of pitches. Types of folksong seem also to have been 'absorbed' into his compositional vernacular, shown by the increasing use of augmented intervals and ornamentation.

The soloist in the trombone concerto *Watt* (1994) resembles the protagonist in Beckett's novel of the same name, who through at first meticulous, later pedantic, description and qualification of everything he encounters, descends into solipsism and incomprehensibility. The trombonist's line obsessively explores permutations of pitches, intervals or other sounds (with ample use of extended techniques). The rest of the orchestra eventually stop playing save for the piccolo, whose solo at the end reminds one that there is still an external world outside of the

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trombonist's sad, mad, platitudes. The concerto for violin and ensemble *Quad* (1996), derives the layout of the score from visual patterns (ex.2); in the Beckett play the four characters trace their own patterns as they seem imprisoned in some infinite ritual. *Quad 2* presents the same action as *Quad 1*, only much slowed down and in black-and-white, as if after millions of years; in Dusapin's works the pace has slowed considerably after the violin cadenza. But Dusapin is interested in the formal properties of the Beckett work; he would quote a statement of Gilles Deleuze (to whom *Quad* is dedicated upon his death) about the Beckett play in connection with his own Third String Quartet (1992):

Though it is entirely determinate, and has specific dimensions, it has no determinants other than its formal peculiarities, its equidistant summits and centre, no contents or occupants other than the four similar people who constantly traverse it. It's a sort of closed space, globally defined.<sup>1</sup>

*Coda* (1992), which could conceivably have been called 'Endgame', is explicitly about the attempt to end a piece of music. It contains multiple figurations and sections which attempt desperately to come to a proper end, but remain stuck in a rut, and can only stop, then start again. An attempt to come to an end

1. Quoted in programme note by Richard Toop for CD Auvidis montaigne MO 782016.



Ex.2: from *Quad* (© Salabert and reproduced by kind permission of UMP)

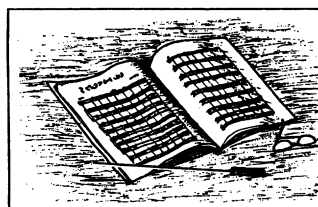
Pascal Dusapin is a featured composer at the Huddersfield Festival of Contemporary Music this month. The London Sinfonietta gives the UK premiere of *Quad* at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on 2 December at 7.45.

is doomed to continue: 'All gnawing to be naught. Never to be naught' (Beckett: *Worstward ho*). A jarring chord brings the work to an abrupt halt, not an end.

But Dusapin is not the type of composer who really wants to 'end' at all. He talks in the context of *Time zones* (1988–90) (which is an autobiographical work written in 24 sections in different locations, which appear in the order they were written) of the idea of an 'infinite quartet', where each new work predicated on space left empty and problems posed by its predecessors (which makes for an interesting comparison with Salvatore Sciarrino's notion of each of his works 'correcting' the last one). This ideal is true of Dusapin's continually evolving body of work (in which many works make use of material from earlier ones – *Roméo et Juliette* does so particularly), and demonstrates a self-critical approach that is too rare when composers continue to create self-styled masterpieces that in reality show nothing more

clearly than their own limitations and ignorance thereof. No, for Dusapin each work is an honest reflection of a particular point within his own life, compositional or otherwise. It is hard to predict exactly what future compositions will be like, and that is one reason why I, at least, am excited by each new work.

If Dusapin's music since *Roméo et Juliette* seems less immediate than previously, and cannot be summed up in a few adjectives in the manner beloved of some critics, it reflects deeper and more searching concerns, and a rigorous questioning of all aspects of the compositional process. It's 'complexity' (in the 1980s Dusapin was sometimes bracketed with Barrett, Dench and Dillon) is more than a matter of quantity of notes: it is about an intricacy of psychology, ideology and historical connotations. All of the music of this most exciting and engaging of living French-born composers should be heard regularly in Britain.



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