

"Beyond ancient frontiers"
biographical notes on Jean-Claude Eloy

by

Ivanka Stoianova

Doctor in Musicology

Professor at Paris VIII University

(text written for the "New Grove dictionary of music" 1998)

*

Jean-Claude Eloy is a French composer born in Mont-Saint-Aignan near Rouen on the 15th of June, 1938.

After his studies at the Paris Conservatory (first prize in piano, chamber music, counterpoint, ondes Martenot and composition with Darius Milhaud), Eloy followed the teachings of Henri Pousseur, Hermann Scherchen, Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen at Darmstadt summer school. In 1961-63, he was a student in Pierre Boulez' composition Master Class at the Bâle Musikademie (Switzerland). Approximately twenty pieces for voice, piano and chambre ensembles, strongly influenced by the "avant-garde" search of the sixties, date from this period.

His first works to be performed in public were "Etude III" for an orchestra and "Equivalences" for 18 musicians, which were outgrowths of the musical waves of the sixties. They were quickly recognized for their outstanding performances conducted by Pierre Boulez, Ernest Bour, Michael Gielen, Bruno Maderna, Arthur Weisberg, etc.

In 1966-68, Eloy was invited as a professor at the University of California in Berkeley. His work then opened up to the more conscious, philosophical and aesthetic influence of Asian cultures, while rejecting nothing from the Western conceptual complexity.

His works from the seventies, "Faisceaux-Diffractions" for 28 instrumentalists and especially "Kâmakalâ" for 3 orchestras, 5 choir groups and 3 conductors represent this orientation quite significantly. They were received with starkly divided criticism along with the support of many celebrities, amongst whom was Olivier Messiaen.

In 1972-73, Eloy was invited by Karlheinz Stockhausen to the Cologne Radio electronic music studio (WDR) where he was able to liberate his profound need for tone exploration and experimentation with musical time: "Shânti" for electronic and concrete sounds was noticed for the richness of its sound material and the scope of its dimensions. Some spoke of an explosion of lyrical abstraction in the context of electronic music, others noticed the influence of Oriental concepts, such as sound as origin and source, as celebration, meditation, rite or magic.

"Fluctuante-Immuable" for an orchestra sought to achieve a translation of the research and discoveries about statistic perception made in the studio into orchestral matter. When first created, the work provoked a scandal as much with the members of the orchestra as within the audience. They were all equally unfamiliar with the specificity of the range of tones inspired by experiments made in the studio.

In 1977-78 with the support of the NHK Tokyo Radio electronic studio, Eloy produced "Gaku-no-Michi", a far-reaching sound fresco which lasted nearly 4 hours and alluded through its form to cinema. It generated a moving architecture from the dialectic relationships between concrete sounds (from daily Japanese life) and abstract (electronic) materials.

In 1978-79, at the invitation of Yannis Xenakis, Eloy worked with the Cemamu and produced "Etude IV" on the UPIC machine. This work pushed the possibilities of this technological tool to its extreme limits.

"Yo-In" : music for an imaginary ritual in 4 acts, covering an entire evening and created in 1980 in the studios of the Utrecht Sound Institute, introduced a new orientation: a character playing percussion using a significant amount of instruments from various origins created a sound action or a musical ritual by constantly building up a complex web of connections between the percussion instruments and the electronic part conceived in the studio and based on the same acoustic sources.

"A l'approche du Feu Méditant" ("Coming Close to a Meditating Fire") is significant of a new orientation in the composer's approach. This work was commissioned by the Japanese National Theatre (Kokuritsu-Gekijo) and was specifically written for Gagaku traditional instruments and two Buddhist monk choirs. The composer had to create an appropriate graphic notation for them.

Pursuing this approach, Eloy tried to bring out in "Anâhata" a new synthesis between human materials and materials produced from new technologies. Anâhata's electroacoustic part was produced in four European studios (Sweelink-Amsterdam, TU-Berlin, ART-Geneva and GRM-Paris). It sought to combine the far-reaching electroacoustic work done in Gaku-no-Michi , the rich scope of percussion and the ritualisation of Yo-In with the creative integration of voices and instruments coming from non-Western civilizations (in this case, Japanese culture: two singing Buddhist monks along with the shô, ryûteki, hichiriki, traditional instruments.)

After dedicating his time to the creation of a centre for music research (CIAMI) in collaboration with the French Ministry of Culture (1983-1988), Eloy broke away from any and all institutional constraints in order to focus on the composition of the "Libérations" cycle. In "Butsumyô" and "Sappho Hilkêtis", composed for the Japanese soprano Yumi Nara, and the Spanish vocalist Fatima Miranda, Eloy explored the possibilities of the female voice and its extended vocal techniques by rediscovering the accents of freely reinvented imaginary ethnic musics.

"Erkos" was produced at the Cologne WDR studio. It was composed for Junko Ueda, a young Satsuma-Biwa soloist, mastering the Shômyô vocal techniques, the Javanese "gamelang", as well as Western musical techniques. With this work, he was able to deepen the synthesis he was looking for between multicultural non-standardised sound sources that go beyond the opposition between the ancient and the new and to confront and bring together precious material coming from the most ancient civilizations with those from the latest technologies.

Nowadays, even though Eloy remains attached to the role of the soloist performing outside of pre-established frames ("Galaxies" with Junko Ueda), he has recently been exploring the overstepping and synthesis of the successive stages of his way, among others through developing a group of synthesizers/samplers.

In 1991-92 Eloy was invited to Berlin by the DAAD, where he has been residing since, dividing his time between that city and Paris.

His awards include: Prix de la Biennale de Paris 1963, Grand prix de la musique symphonique de chambre SACEM 1971, Grand prix de l'Académie Charles Cros 1974, Grand prix National de la musique, Ministère de la Culture 1981, Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres 1983, Grand prix de la musique symphonique SACEM 1985.

As a musician, Eloy possesses an extremely vast culture and a strong and free spirit. He has always developed his work outside of institutions, cliques and trends.

In the sixties, he was Pierre Boulez' favourite pupil, but since then, he has moved away from the influence of the "avant garde" masters in order to focus on his own research, always seeking to systematically obliterate distances belonging to historical time and to differences between cultures. Every one of his works, in its own way, breaks down and goes beyond ancient boundaries between a fully integrated Western music and non-European complex musical traditions.

Belonging to the first generation of composers who pursues ongoing training, he possesses a conservatory classical background that he constantly renews through the assimilation of all the new technologies useful to musical practice and composition. In his works, Eloy achieves a unique synthesis between music belonging to various traditions thus challenging the pre-established habits. The use of instruments and techniques that are alien to Western tradition and the often extreme lengthiness of his works demand a significant change in our listening abilities.

Eloy's compositional research always aims for the true creation which differs from any form of imitation or exoticism and lies outside the boundaries of a music confined to Europe or a specific national character.

His works strongly embody a productive synthesis that ignores the limits of space and time and places the elements of voice, instruments, techniques and contributions from foreign cultures together to pursue a powerful and genuine quest in his compositional projects.

There is often a true complementary logic in the progression of Eloy's works : "Kâmakalâ" is conceived as the spreading out of the primal vital force or as the birth of the world. "Shânti" is the manifestation of this contradictory energy within its long metamorphoses through the vastness of the expression of sounds. Shânti is a work conceived on the model of the "Eternal Return". It can start again and again on its own but also stop when a new "Kâmakalâ" is inserted.

Similarly, "A l'approche du Feu Méditant" and "Anâhata" have a succession based on the logic of movement inside of a given galaxy. "Sappho Hikêtis", "Butsumyôe", "Erkos" and "Gaia" are all part of a new open galaxy, freely exploring the vocal resources and possibilities of the latest technologies, most particularly the boundless treasure represented by the culture of "others", in an extremely enriching dialogue.

A solitary composer who has managed one of the most significant syntheses of 20th century music (between electronic and acoustic music but also between Western and non-European traditions), Eloy tackles and convincingly solves an essential problem of our time: the relationship to the other, to the stranger, to what is different not as much as a curiosity, admiration or object of submission, but as a vitalizing source to creative inspiration.

Dr Ivanka Stoïanova, Paris 1998

Translation from the French : Olia Lumelsky and Meredith Escudier