

Ballif, Claude (1924-2004) : Overview of his Writings

The writings of Claude Ballif (1924-2004) are particularly extensive. They include two theoretical volumes: *Introduction à la métatonalité* (Paris, Richard-Masse, 1956), which formed the basis for his compositional activity after the Second World War, at the beginning of his career, and *Économie musicale : Souhais entre symboles* (Paris, Méridien-Klincksieck, 1979), a sort of anti-composition treatise. There is also *Berlioz*, in the well-known "Solfège" series of composer biographies (Éditions du Seuil, 1968), a collection of articles, *Voyage de mon oreille* (Union Générale d'Éditions, coll. 10-18, 1979), and two volumes of interviews: *L'Habitant du labyrinthe* with Alain Galliari (Pro Musica, 1996), and *Claude Ballif, musicien de la révélation*, with Bruno Serrou (Michel de Maule, 2004).

Claude Ballif also published more than 90 articles. These include musicological research like "L'Ars Nova et Guillaume Machaut," written for the *Encyclopédie des musiques sacrées*, notices on composers, poets, and painters (such as Berlioz, Couperin, Debussy, Liszt, Mallarmé, Seurat, Varèse, Wyschnegradsky, etc.), and contributions in response to requests for lectures, interviews, program notes, or autobiographical texts. Apart from his *Berlioz* and the interviews with Bruno Serrou, which are still in print, most of these writings can be found in two volumes of *Écrits* (Hermann, 2015).

Claude Ballif's writings are conserved at the Médiathèque musicale Mahler-Fondation Royaumont, to which the composer's heirs entrusted his archives. In addition to these writings, Ballif's archives include the manuscripts and scores of his works as well as numerous other documents (notes, sketches, correspondence, programs, photographs, etc.).

Claude Ballif's writings correspond to a combined theoretical and pedagogical objective. In *Introduction à la métatonalité* (1956), the writing is primarily theoretical and was intended to accompany his work as a composer. Following the Second World War, Ballif, positioned himself as a composer in the midst of a particularly talented generation (Boulez, Barraqué, Berio, Stockhausen, etc.). He sought to surpass what he felt was the artificial opposition of tonality and atonality with the concept of "metatonality," forged through his compositional work: "this metatonality has allowed me to surpass the outdated and conventional concepts of modality, tonality, and atonality by moving toward a single vision, illustrated by a sole and unique metatonal scale [of eleven pitches]" (*L'habitant du labyrinthe*, interview with Alain Galliari, *Écrits*, vol. 1, p. 475, Hermann, 2015). Ballif's intention was not to sweep away the past but to move beyond its oppositions and unite them by doing so: in this sense, Ballif was a "mediator" (Daniel Charles).

Professor at the École normale de musique de Paris (1963–1964), the Conservatoire de Reims (1965–1971), the Conservatoire de Paris (1971–1989), and later at Sevrans (1990–2000) and Caracas (2000), Ballif also wrote a number of pedagogical texts. He collected his thinking on composition in *Économie musicale : Souhais entre symboles*, which he dedicated to his students at McGill University in Montréal where he taught in 1978–1979.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ballif was regularly honored in *La Revue musicale*. Directed by Albert Richard, with whom Ballif maintained a friendly relationship and who had published his *Introduction à la métatonalité*, *La Revue musicale* later published Ballif's "Réponse à l'enquête de Boucourechliev: la musique sérielle aujourd'hui" and "Points-mouvements" in 1968. On the occasion of his sixtieth birthday in 1984 and during the Festival Estival de Paris, following the suggestion of Bernard Bonaldi, *La Revue musicale* also published "Fragments retrouvés" and "Propos de Claude Ballif," gathered by Bernard Bonaldi, Francis Bayer, and Francis Pinguet. In 1972, Ballif directed a special issue of the journal on Nicolas Obukhov and Ivan Wyschnegradsky to which he contributed "Idéalisme et matérialité," a long exordium preparing his presentation of Scriabin, Obukhov, and Wyschnegradsky (this text was later reprinted in *Voyage de mon oreille*).

Ballif remained rather discreet regarding his activity as a composer and his own works. Sometimes during lectures, he offered "his vision" of music and described his work as a composer as well as his connection to faith, which is also illustrated by the important number of religious works he composed. The interviews with Alain Galliari and Bruno Serrou as well as his published correspondence, in which Ballif discusses some of his works in detail, might also be cited: *Coup de dés* with Daniel Charles; his organ music with Yves-Marie Pasquet; *Passe-temps* op. 38 no. 2 for piano with Dick Higgins (*Écrits*, vol. 2, Hermann).

For Ballif, writing was an act that affirmed his work as a composer: either defining and explaining his own works or positioning himself in music history in relation to his contemporaries and his "beacons": Machaut, Bach, Berlioz, Debussy, Scriabin, Varèse, Webern, and Wyschnegradsky. Claude Ballif possessed his own style, his own particular manner of saying things and expressing himself: his writing is colorful, sometimes elliptic, always lively and punchy. He often gives numerous examples that refer to literature, poetry, painting, or philosophy, to the point of dizzying his reader.

If for Ballif, "it is much easier to write music than an article," (*Claude Ballif, un musicien de la révélation*, interview with Bruno Serrou, Éd. Michel de Maule, p. 34), he nevertheless had a special relationship to language and words, as is illustrated by the importance of his works for voice composed on poems by Mallarmé (*Le Coup de dés, Chansons bas*), Apollinaire (*Le Cortège d'Orphée - le Bestiaire*), Trakl (*Musik im Mirabel*), Tzara (*Minuit pour géants*), Henri Michaux (*Apparitions*), Roger Giroux (*Retrouver la parole*), or André Brochu (*Poèmes lents*). However, apart from poetic texts, Ballif clearly distinguishes between literature and music: "All things being equal, there is the same extreme world between music and literature as there is between the world of the sea and the earth. The earth belongs to letters, and music to the waves of the sea" ("Littérature et musique," *Écrits*, vol. 2, p. 387).

It is difficult to assess the reception of Ballif's writings. *L'introduction à la métatonalité* was published in 1956 while he was living in Germany. Its influence was likely felt later, among his students. For example, Marc-André Dalbavie turned to certain ideas of metatonicity in his *Color*, his work for orchestra of 2001. But Ballif the independent surely captured his readers' imagination through the freedom of his tone, which is expressed, according to Alain Poirier, "in the caustic style that was his in all of his writings and declarations, a blend of revolt and passion, the cat's claw and the elegance of the scholar," ("Préface," *Écrits*, Hermann, vol. 1, p. 5). Though his texts are sometimes difficult, they inspire deep admiration for Ballif's reflections on music which are always lively, which draw from his vast culture, and which are presented with humor and without pedantry.

Gabriel Ballif

14/12/2020

Trans. : Christopher Murray

Further reading:

Claude Ballif [website](#)

http://www.mediathequemahler.org/mmm/ressources_en_ligne/fonds_d_archives#ballif

Biget, Michelle et Castanet, Pierre-Albert (dir.), *Claude Ballif*, numéro 20-21 des *Cahiers du CIREM*, 1991.

Charles, Daniel, « Ballif le médiateur », *Revue musicale*, n° 263, 1968, p. 19 ; repris dans Charles, Daniel, *Musiques nomades*, Kimé, 1998.

Charles, Daniel « Ballif, le postmoderne », dans Charles, Daniel, *La fiction de la postmodernité selon l'esprit de la musique*, Paris, PUF, 2001.

Tosi, Michèle, *L'Ouverture métatonale*, Paris, Durand, 1992.

Tosi, Michèle, *Claude Ballif*, Cahors, PO Éditions, 1996.

To quote this article: Gabriel Ballif (trans. Christopher Murray), "Ballif, Claude (1924-2004) : Overview of his Writings", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 28/09/2021, <https://dicteco.humanum.fr/person/52804>.