

François-Bernard Mâche, *Musique, mythe, nature ou les dauphins d'Arion* [Music, Myth, Nature: or, The Dolphins of Arion] (1983)

In this self-described “essay”—which takes up ideas developed in his State Doctorate thesis titled, “L’idée de modèle en musique aujourd’hui” [The Idea of the Model in Music Today], François-Bernard Mâche proposes “some insights, which do not conform to the new orthodoxies that have taken over from classical theories, which have definitively run their course” (p. 3, first edition). In sometimes polemical terms (in the first edition, at least—the initial virulence was attenuated in subsequent editions), Mâche outlines the theoretical foundations of his musical practice. Advocating an approach that brings together diverse intellectual methods—drawing upon human and life sciences, going well beyond the purely musical—he critiques the culturalist anthropocentrism of the humanities during the 1970s and ’80s, citing the existence of cultural practices among animals and demonstrating their points of convergence with human practices. These assertions pave the way to new domains, such as zoomusicology (the title of one of his chapters), or the neurobiological study of creative processes.

Across five chapters (“Music in Myth”, “The Universality of Sound Models”, “Speech and Music”, “Zoomusicology”, and “The Model in Music”), Mâche gradually extends his reflection on the deep structures of the imaginary and of musical creation, which motivate his aesthetic ambition to put into creative practice the notion of the “model”.

Observing the recurrence of “mythemes” in different mythological traditions, Mâche sees myths as containing “natural images” (p. 11), which emanate from a collective unconscious, which manifests itself in culturally diverse ways. For Mâche, musical creation emanates from the same “spontaneous function of the human mind” as does myth (p. 19). Based on that spontaneity, he infers the existence of mythical and musical universals, and hypothesizes a neurophysiological source of this activity, thereby calling into question what was then viewed as the impenetrable relationship between nature and culture.

In probing the relations between speech and music, Mâche evokes his own use of the model of language in a work like *Safous Méléè*, and his efforts in structural musicology; he concludes that if indeed there is a paradigm common to speech and music, the latter, given its unlimited semantic field, encompasses language. In his view, western music, both in its history and in its recent developments, is marked by an overvaluation of the sign, and is thus ill-suited to do justice to the richness of sonic possibilities now available.

It is in the chapter titled “Zoomusicology” that Mâche most fully transcends the nature/culture boundary. He analyzes birdsongs with a segmentation method borrowed from structural linguistics, and deduces the existence of a true artistic practice, which cannot be reduced to simple biological imperatives of communication. Comparing birds’ practices of organizing sonic elements with examples drawn from western repertoire (Debussy, Stravinsky), he affirms the universality of the play of musical inventiveness among living things—an inventiveness that emerges as much from innate mechanisms as from culturally contingent constructions.

This is the reasoning claimed by Mâche for his own use of sonic models—not superficial imitation, but a return to natural elements of invention. Nature, for him, does not refer only to the “external sonosphere” (p. 113), but also to the principle of “internal legislation”, which he aims to achieve based on “sensory contact with phenomena” (p. 114). In his view, music is the “apprehension of the world”, and working with sonic models allows him to place the artistic practice in resonance with the real world, based on relationships of metonymy and metaphor.

The interest generated by this work led the author to propose a second edition in 1991, edited (especially to delete the most polemical passages concerning serialism) and updated in light of recent musical developments, followed by a third edition, in 2015, with a CD of musical examples. The 1991 edition was translated into Italian and English.

Beyond his articles, François-Bernard Mâche expanded upon his reflections on this subject in *Musique au singulier* (2001).

Anne-Sylvie BARTHEL-CALVET
04/06/2018

Trans. Peter Asimov

Translator’s note: English translations of quotations taken from the published translation by Susan Delaney (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1992); however page numbers refer to the French original.

Further reading

- Pierre-Albert Castanet, "Quatre écrits de compositeurs - Boucourechliev, Dufourt, Mâche, Manoury", *Les Cahiers du CIREM*, n° 18-19, décembre 1989-mars 1990, p. 159-160.

- Rodger Reynolds, "Seeking Centers", *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 32, n°2, 1994, p. 272-291.

To quote this article: Anne-Sylvie Barthel-Calvet, "François-Bernard Mâche, Musique, mythe, nature ou les dauphins d’Arion [Music, Myth, Nature: or, The Dolphins of Arion] (1983)", *Dictionary of Composer's Writings*, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 03/10/2022, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/34475>.