

André Boucourechliev, *Le langage musical* (1993)

Published in 1993, two years after the *Essai sur Beethoven*, *Le langage musical* is unique among Boucourechliev's writings: aside from *Dire la musique* (1995), a compendium of articles, it is his only book not devoted to a great figure from music history.

Its subject stands out as vast, complex, ambitious. What is "the musical language", how is it instantiated in the genres and works of Western music, how does it evolve in time? Such are the questions that Boucourechliev sets out to answer in a little under two hundred pages. More than anyone, he recognised the "perilous, some might say pretentious" nature of such an enterprise (p. 7), but the undertaking seemed to him more necessary than ever. He saw himself as responding to a deficiency, filling in a gap in the literature: for all the books about music, "no one talks about" the musical *language* (p. 7).

As though to compensate for the vastness and complexity of his subject, Boucourechliev paid particular attention to clarity of structure. His book has a solid architecture, following a trajectory that, broadly, leads the reader from the general to the particular, from technical to historical matters.

Chapter One, "Le langage musical", confronts the important, not to say daunting, aesthetic questions. Is music a "language"? If so, how does it differ from the natural languages? Does it, like them, convey meanings, or sentiments? How does it relate to the word? These preliminary clarifications dispensed with, Boucourechliev is in a position to offer his definition of music: "a system of differences that structures time under the category of the sonorous" (p. 21). The rest of the chapter then falls to explicating this definition. It deals in turn with the issues of difference, rhythm, music's function over the short term (the timescale of tonal and serial syntax) and the long (that of form), its transmission by performers, its reception by listeners.

"From Language to Work": in its title the second chapter lays out a whole programme. Boucourechliev's task here is to show the ways in which composers have exploited, each after his own fashion, the system of differences constituting the musical language. This takes the form of a survey of the major genres of Western music in its notated tradition: opera, the symphony, the *Lied*, the quartet, the theme and variations. The panorama is enlivened with numerous analyses of musical examples, chosen as much for their exemplary character as for Boucourechliev's affection for them, preventing it from becoming too abstract. The chapter closes with a stimulating analysis of *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, executed, as though to underscore Debussy's modernity, with categories developed by Stockhausen!

Finally, the third and last chapter offers a series of “anchor points”. Here Boucourechliev was trying to relate the questions of language and structure to the messy, mobile pageant of music history. He invites the reader on a sixty-page journey from plainsong to Webern. Needless to say, he makes no claim to exhaustivity, seeking rather to provide music-lovers with key reference points to orientate them within a labyrinth rendered ever more bewildering by the proliferation of recordings. Yet this final chapter is much more than a synopsis of more encyclopaedic histories. Here as elsewhere, Boucourechliev does not forgo his subjectivity, his likes and dislikes: this is not just a history but *his* history of music.

Le langage musical is a mature work, ambitious and fascinating. Though very personal, it betrays certain important influences (that of Boris de Schlöezer, Boucourechliev’s “maître à penser”, but also of Roland Barthes, André Souris, and Nicolas Ruwet, among others). It comes as no surprise to find a certain number of music appreciation commonplaces: the necessary distinction between life and works, the musical sense as an immanent sense, the primacy of rhythm (the “foundational power of musical time”, p. 33), the refusal of a music history as a story of progress, etc. Finally, one must pay tribute to the limpidity of Boucourechliev’s writing, the quality of the popularisation, his constant concern to guide the neophyte. He goes as far as to conclude, not without humour, a complex section on Stockhausen’s theories with an “Abstract (Ad usum delphini)” (p. 118) that summarises in very simple language the ideas expounded by his German colleague in the dense article “...wie die Zeit vergeht...” (1957). This pedagogical ambition, so unlike the doggedly technical, even abstruse character of many texts by composers, is not the least merit of this fine book.

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