

Paul Méfano (1937-2020): An Overview of His Writings

Paul Méfano belongs among the great names of French music in the second half of the twentieth century. A student of Messiaen, Milhaud, and Boulez, he found his personal path as a composer by prioritising both experimentation with certain instruments (such as the flute and saxophone) and by seeking new forms of expression in orchestral and vocal writing. His conducting career, as head of the ensemble 2e2m, which he founded, also represents a major contribution to the diffusion of new music of every kind in his times.

Compared to most composers of his generation, Méfano wrote little. Only two essays by him were published in his lifetime: "Texte et partition : déconstruction, topologie et instrumentation d'un texte poétique (in *Textual*, no. 41[2002], pp. 161-70) and "Micromégas, lecture" (in *Voltaire à l'opéra*, ed. François Jacob [Paris: Garnier, 2011], pp. 213-19). The latter originated in a 2004 lecture at the Institut Voltaire in Geneva, and deals mainly with Méfano's opera *Micromégas* and the interpretation of Voltaire's work that this represents.

On the other hand, Méfano's thinking and details of his activity are documented in the numerous (at least fifteen) interviews that he gave; some of these have been published recently, including those conducted by Laurent Martin for his book *Paul Méfano : témoignages et entretiens* (2014, in French and English), others with Gérard Geay for *Paul Méfano : les chemins d'un musicien poète* (2017), and the 'dialogues' with Renaud François interspersed throughout their book *Dialogues entre sons et paroles* (2017). But some of the older and less accessible interviews are just as noteworthy.

Méfano also wrote numerous liner notes and concert programmes, often very significant for the understanding of his music (see notably the booklets for the three CDs of the collection devoted to him by 2^e2m).

Finally, some of the radio broadcasts featuring Méfano are highly interesting, especially the one with Antoine Goléa on France Culture entitled "Rencontre avec les jeunes compositeurs", broadcast on 10 October 1966. Pierre Michel directed a film about his residency at the Strasbourg Conservatoire in December of 2013, containing an interview with the composer that was included in the DVD of the book *Paul Méfano : les chemins d'un musicien poète*, available on the Internet.

The Fonds Paul Méfano at the Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg contains a dozen unpublished texts and lecture scripts, among which might be mentioned "La vocalité, le silence", offered to the magazine *Musique en jeu* but never published; "Espace/Musique"; "Cinq chants et un oiseau caché : un

compositeur se mesure à un autre compositeur”, written on the occasion of the performance of the motet *Placebo domino in regione vivorum* (1976); “Grammaire et expressivité” (1989); and “Sons et images” (2002).

In his essays and interviews Méfano dealt with questions of art, poetry (he wrote poems himself and often set major poets in his works), sociology, and sometimes religion and politics. He several times discussed the introduction of contemporary music (and its problems) into the cultural scene beyond the capital, having worked with 2^em to promote twentieth-century art music in Champigny-sur-Marne and other provincial towns. His thinking comes down to us mainly in the form of interviews and lecture scripts, sometimes quite close to the spoken word though always very formal in register. Méfano’s writings have not given rise to much in the way of debate or discussion, since they remain largely unpublished.

Pierre MICHEL

27/02/2024

Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

To quote this article: Pierre Michel, "Paul Méfano (1937–2020): An Overview of His Writings", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 21/02/2025, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/person/64838>.