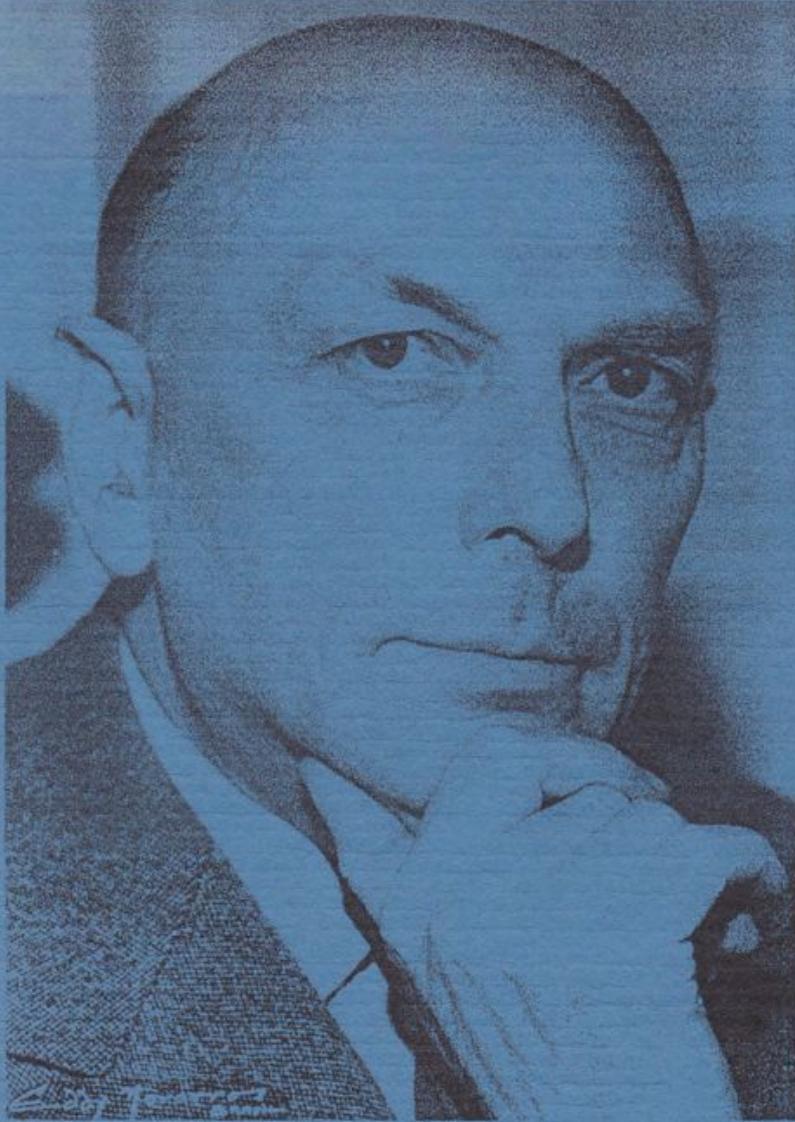


*Caïn et Abel*



Actes du Colloque de Cerisy :

*Henri Michaux  
est-il seul ?*

## **Instants-Passages**

for soprano, clarinet, violoncello and percussion  
(adapted from excerpts from *L'infini turbulent*<sup>1</sup> by Henri Michaux)

**Clara Maïda**

INSIEME ensemble commission  
Première on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1998 - Soirées Musicales d'Arles (Arles Musical Evenings)

INSIEME ensemble (Françoise ATLAN, soprano; Magali RUBIO, clarinet; Bernard AMRANI, cello and Frédéric DAUMAS, percussion).

**Article published in *Les cahiers bleus* journal, Troyes, October 1999**

Over the last few years, my compositional research has been an attempt at articulating musical discourse along the same lines as unconscious psychic processes. *Instants-Passages* outlines a moving network of plural sound objects which are never fixed or completed but metamorphosing, fissuring, combining one with another to give rise to composite textures, temporarily setting up montages, unsteady compositions through their endless developing activity.

The framework of the piece would come apart if the irrepressible energy which runs through it did not bring in insistent lines of forces between the fragments, persistences which make them echo one another.

During the composition of the piece *Instants-passages*, I was imbued with the recent reading of three psychoanalytical works, *L'espace imaginaire* and *Le corps, l'espace et le temps* by Sami-Ali<sup>2</sup>, as well as *L'œuvre du temps en psychanalyse* by Sylvie Le Poulichet<sup>3</sup>.

The relationship between Henri Michaux's mescaline experiments and the imaginary space-time described by both psychoanalysts (whose most self-evident element of which remains dream processes) became immediately obvious.

I thus chose to apprehend Henri Michaux's text through psychoanalytical research focused on the functioning of the unconscious (and not exclusively on its content).

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1964

Two excerpts are chosen (p.11 and pp. 75-76).

<sup>2</sup> Sami-Ali, *L'espace imaginaire (Imaginary Space)*, Paris, Gallimard, Coll. "Tel", 1974. Sami-Ali, *Le corps, l'espace et le temps (The Body, Time and Space)*, Paris, Dunod, 1990

<sup>3</sup> Sylvie Le Poulichet, *L'œuvre du temps en psychanalyse (The Work of Time in Psychoanalysis)*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 1994

Besides (I will come back to this further on), the linguistic approach has also been invaluable.

In dreams, the psychic isolation in which the dreamer is placed in relation to the outside world, starts a corporeal experience which destroys the distance between the subject and space. Body boundaries are abolished, the opposition inside-outside is destroyed and there is an absolute coincidence between the subject and the space of the dream. "*A double projection of the subject establishes a relationship of mutual inclusion, such as the subject finds himself inside of himself, in a space which is himself.*"<sup>4</sup>

The space of dream becomes an unlimited body space which can indefinitely spread or, on the contrary, dwindle into a tiny dot. In this non-permanence, the subject splits up, is atomized in the figures which come across his dream. "*The dreamer himself finds himself identified in the field of the dream to those objects that look at him and constitute him since there is no longer any gap between what is seen and the point where it is seen from.*"<sup>5</sup>

The subject disintegrates, scattered into the images of the content of the dream, simultaneously taking place in several vantage points. (The existence of a unique perspective, of a centre from which the Ego would watch the visible, is completely destroyed in dreams).

This experience of dream can be related to the subject's condition under the influence of mescaline. Any sensation of body and psychic unity is lost (besides, it is a constant in Michaux's work, enhanced here by drug-taking). No more global form, perceived totality, but a multitude of fragments of objects, of molecules into which the Ego is absorbed.

In both selected excerpts, the process begins in a complete dissolution of the identity of the visible figures, connecting here Michaux's experiment with the schizophrenic process described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: "*There is a schizophrenic experience of intensive quantities in the pure state [...] a feeling of intense passage, states of pure and raw intensity, divested of their figure and their shape.*"<sup>6</sup>

The dissemination of the subject into the objects of the dream would go on with the disintegration into particles of the subject-object complex, like a plunge into the heart of matter as described in modern physics, reminding here the schizophrenic experience once again: "*he who was settling down at this unbearable point where the psyche touches matter and lives and consumes every bit of its intensity.*"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sami-Ali, *Le corps, l'espace et le temps (The Body, Space and Time)*, Paris, Dunod, 1990, p. 96

<sup>5</sup> Sylvie Le Poulichet, *L'œuvre du temps en psychanalyse (The Work of Time in Psychoanalysis)*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 1994, p. 64

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe (Anti-Œdipus)*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, Coll. "Critique", p. 25

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

## **Selection of both excerpts**

This choice was motivated by what connects them. For both, the visible starting point is a perception (visual in the case of the first excerpt, auditory in the case of the second one), but an obvious ambiguity immediately appears.

Is it really a perception or a projection of the psychic mechanisms disrupted by mescaline which is described in those pages? Does what Michaux observes react to his mode of mental activity, "*the turbulence of air and dust*"<sup>8</sup> inducing a collapse of his cerebral faculties, or does the disintegration of the state of consciousness generated by the drug contaminate any perception of the objects which surround him, making them burst into the "dust of objects" ("poussières")?

Would he become what he sees or would he see what he becomes, the distance between subject and object being abolished here until it leads to an atomization, a disappearance of the Ego? (not "I" but "*one is in*", "*there is*"). He is absorbed by what he sees or hears, he totally coincides with the visible or the audible which fascinates him, but this fascination takes place only because the fragmentation process is already in progress. A kind of infinite *feedback* is carried out. Being pulverized, he pulverizes what he perceives and this pulverized perception emphasizes even more the pulverization of identity, and thus until the subject, objects, space, time are annihilated. Only non-directional, non-located particles where any subject is absent from remain.

On a musical level, how to convey this instant when consciousness reels, starting a whole series of disruptions to come?

An auditory shock has to be generated (hence the violent and brutal start of the piece), in order to trigger a tipping effect and an adherence without the possibility of keeping a distance from sound. It results in a particular listening mode. The listener will memorize this shock, in a kind of concentration area, at a focalization point which, not only immediately opens a temporal gap (time seems to have swept into the violence of the sound impact), but also leaves its imprint on the music that follows.

I will come back further on to the musical material of the piece as such by describing more specifically the main approaches considered during the composition.

## **Selection of the title of the piece**

The selection of the title *Instants-Passages* refers to the functioning of the unconscious observed by the psychoanalysts mentioned above.

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<sup>8</sup> Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1964

According to Sami-Ali, "*The time of dream is always the present, an absolute present which creates itself at each instant of the same dream and which merges with the presence.*"<sup>9</sup>, a series of images of one presence at any point in time.

According to Sylvie Le Poulichet, in the unconscious, "*there is no direction, there is only some passage which persists*"<sup>10</sup>, a self-engendering activity, in permanent flux, in which the connections, the passages between the figures are more meaningful than the figures themselves.

I have condensed both approaches as well as the reiterated use of both words by Michaux in both excerpts ("*passages*" in the first excerpt, "*instants*" in the second one) in a title *Instants-Passages*, a kind of composite object already made up for the listener even before the work can be heard.

### **The linguistic approach**

My first way to approach the text, once I was permeated with its semantic content, was to proceed with its phonetic transcription in order to have a more precise idea of the phonemes, the most recurrent sonorities. A twofold operation consists in counting how many times each phoneme is repeated, then in assessing the relationships between these phonemes, their trajectory within the sentence so as to extract the flux linked to their utterance by the vocal apparatus (closing, opening of the mouth, type and place of articulation).

The place where sounds are formed remind me of the hypnagogic experiences described by some subjects. The individual sees himself living within a constantly mutating space, which, at the same time, represents the inside of the mouth as if the subject was in a space which was inside himself (the mutual inclusion relationship previously described by Sami-Ali is recognized here).

In order to find again the coincidence between the sound space and the space of the mouth cavity, it is necessary to compose musical paths echoing the trajectories of the phonemes in the text.

In the first excerpt, for instance, labial occlusions (*p*), of aperture 0 are disseminated across the text. Besides, a large number of apico-dental occlusives (*d*, *t*, aperture 0) is followed by the increasing presence of muffled sibilant (*s*) and palato-alveolar fricatives (*ch*, *j*, aperture 1, therefore slightly larger), the evocation of a path which undergoes a slight dilation while, at the same time, the vibrant consonant *r* (wider aperture), very frequent at the beginning of the excerpt, is more and more rarefied in the middle and reappears at the end in a movement which contrasts with the previous one.

Besides, the alternations of open and closed vowels evoke an endless movement: "*passages d'images*": *a i a* (open/closed/open), "*passages d'idées*": *a i é* (open/closed/slightly less closed), "*passages d'envies*": *a en i* (open/open/closed).

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<sup>9</sup> Sami-Ali, *Le corps, l'espace et le temps (The Body, Space and Time)*, Paris, Dunod, 1990, p. 100

<sup>10</sup> Sylvie Le Poulichet, *L'œuvre du temps en psychanalyse (The Work of Time in Psychoanalysis)*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 1994, p. 64

At the end of the excerpt, this opening/closing/opening process is condensed in the word "*agité*" (*a i é*).

(It goes without saying that the phonemes considered are those that are the most represented in the selected excerpt; 26 dental occlusives, 15 labial occlusives, 17 palato-alveolar fricatives and 22 muffled sibilant consonants, 35 closed vowels -- *i* and *é* --, 42 open vowels -- *a* and *en* --, the other phonemes are not represented in significant numbers).

This observation enables one to highlight a polyphony of sometimes contradictory paths, micro-movements, contracting here, dilating there, creating zones of condensation or the emptiness within the fabric of the text, triggering torsions which strengthen its semantic content ("*agité*"), and are precious clues for the composition.

On a strictly musical level, how can one trace these passages of energy, these tensions which seem to be distorting verbal matter?

I opted for developing a drifting, disorganized, poly-directional and fluctuating musical matter. It overflows the listener with an increasing flow of sound excitations, thereby creating an uncertainty in listening. The energy which flows, cuts through the texture, allowing micro-formulae which are instantly absorbed by this huge flow carrying and swallowing everything on its way, even its own residues.

This instability of globality is also to be found in the musical objects themselves, kinds of micro-structures of a reeling nature (glissandi, crescendo sound complex/splinter/silence, swaying movement between two timbres alternately presented, etc.).

In the second excerpt, the predominance of phonemes presenting an opposing aperture degree reappears, more particularly perceptible regarding the vowels level (48 closed vowels, 48 open vowels). Within each sentence, each path goes from closing to opening ("*il y a une ampleur*": *i a an eu*, slight fluctuations on the aperture level, always in a movement of utterance which coils on itself to lead each time to more widening, the same sentence being more and more developed).

Thus here, the rhythm is different from the one observed in the first excerpt, but I will come to this field further on.

As for consonants (they are nearly all represented, except the palato-alveolar fricatives), numerous fluctuations ranging from aperture 0 to aperture 3 redraw an extreme mobility (especially in the second part of this excerpt), still enhanced by the rhythm of the sentences which gradually accelerates (with a transition from long sentences to shorter ones this time), then to repeated three syllable formulae ("*qui se forme, s'achève, s'effondre*").

## Rhythmical approach

Beyond their semantic and phonological relationship, both excerpts have different spatio-temporal tempos and rhythms.

The first excerpt can be described as fast, abrupt, poly-directional. As I said above, it has generated an extremely mobile sound matter, undergoing vibrations, oscillations, distortions, surges, sudden stops then repeats.

The instrumental writing will convey this agitation by means of several processes (an absence of melodic stability, the melodic textures oscillating around a few close pitches, a harmony crossed with micro-slidings suggesting unsteady geological strata).

The second excerpt works according to a circular way (with kinds of wider and wider concentric circles, short sentences then longer and longer, built on the model: "*il y a une ampleur*", the word "*ampleur*" being developed through a series of more and more numerous ornamentations.

Here, the texture gets more fragile, only the voice unfolds in melismatic writing, with micro-intervallic embroideries. It is accompanied only by the sounds of the vibraphone played with a double bass bow (very pure and fine sounds) and the rumble *ppp* of the Chinese tam-tam which enhances this increasing depth of space. The very deep resonance of the tam-tam leads to a kind of temporal suspension in which only a few harmonics echo (a feeling of almost hypnotic psychic vacuum induced by the repetition of the word "*ampleur*" and evoking Deleuze and Guattari here again: "*the subject is spreading around the circumference of the circle whose centre has been deserted.*"<sup>11</sup>).

An inversion of the flow appears in the second part. An acceleration process builds up through the repetition of certain words (this process was already used in the first excerpt in which the layout of the reiterations of the word "*passages*" was underlining the growing disruption already perceptible in the increasingly halting fragments of sentences). Here, the words "*instant*" and "*suivant*" insistently come round, the repeated formulae such as "*qui se fait, qui se forme, qui s'achève*", in spite of slight variations, end up giving the illusion of an eternal resumption of the same moment, the same phonemes being disseminated in different words, of eternally starting again the same instant which could be the "*catastrophic instant*" that Sylvie Le Poulichet evokes: "*the catastrophic instant would be this temporal mode in which the ego is reduced to the tip of the instant, endlessly moving to the tip of another instant which is the same and yet different : denuded, uninhabitable time [...] for at each passage from instant to instant -- to which the ego and time are thus reduced -- an abyss seems to be yawning where the ego might really disappear.*"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe (Anti-Œdipus)*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, Coll. "Critique", p. 28

<sup>12</sup> Sylvie Le Poulichet, *L'œuvre du temps en psychanalyse (The Work of Time in Psychoanalysis)*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 1994, p. 121

The play upon iterative sonorities, the ternary time morphology of these almost similar formulae end up producing at first a more and more scanned rhythm, on the phonemes *k*, *s*, *f*, by the soprano and the performers, as if it was detached from the text it derives from, then independently from the voice which was uttering it, played by the percussion in an increasingly bewitching development and leading up to silence, in a kind of self-absorbing sound process.

### **The pulverization of the subject gives birth to a pulverization of sound**

The treatment of the voice, its location in the musical matter of the piece, are the reflections of psychic disruptions. It will oscillate between a presence relatively detached from the instrumental texture (the token of a subject of utterance, shaken as he may be in his innermost structures, but still able to describe the experience he has been through), and a loss of identity which pulverizes and hurls it into the heart of the fabric woven by the various instruments. It then becomes deprived of its semantic content, a pure sound material. Demultiplied into several voices (the performers whisper some words of the text: "*agitation*", "*turbulence*"), it also undergoes an atomization of the words which it utters, some of them may be lengthened by stretching a consonant which follows an independent path ("*agitation*" → *sss*, "*feu*" → *fff*).

Similarly to Michaux's processes (phonemes of a word scattered in other words: "*passages*" → "*images*" → "*haché*" → "*agité*"), the voice gets split, manifold, and simultaneously exists in several places (for instance, the word "*agité*" is vocalized by the soprano: *a i é a i é...*, while the percussionist utters the syllables "*gi-té*").

The outcome is a greater depth of sound field. Echoing effects, reverberations, dislocations, are induced by this explosion of the verbal material. Moreover, the latter mutes into musical material. Consonants become noise, but instrumental sound too (thus, on the sound level, *f* can be associated to the rubbing of a metal stick on the surface of the Chinese tam-tam, *s* gets lengthened through the rattle of a maracas), still adding to the confusion of identity.

### **Further remarks**

Apart from my work on the text as such, I have chosen to use Henri Michaux's drawings<sup>13</sup> as well as his graphics under the influence of mescaline<sup>14</sup>.

The poetical but also pictorial and graphic materials have thus determined the choice of the musical writing described above (trills, glissandi, oscillating melodic textures, melismatic writing, the rapidity of the flow, mobility, the luxuriance of sound but a musical fabric torn apart, are its main features).

On the other hand, the fragmented form of the piece, a series of states of extreme tension whose most common outcome is a fracture leading to silence, refers to the whole of *L'infini turbulent*,

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<sup>13</sup> Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1964 (drawings included between pp. 48-49)

<sup>14</sup> Henri Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, pp. 54-55, 86-87 and 120-121

series of broken visions, which do not systematically include links with one another, leaving spatio-temporal blanks (the blank of the page, suspension points), kinds of gaping holes in the flesh of the work.

The last part of *Instants-Passages* builds up around the words written in the margin of the first selected excerpt, in a kind of repetitive structure playing at the same time on the words themselves but also on certain syllables ("*a-a-agité*", "*tu-tu-turbulence*"), an attempt at clearing a space in the margin, but also resonance, the residue of all that has preceded.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, the composition work has built up around two poles: on the one hand, the analytical work bearing specifically on both excerpts as described above, and on the other hand, the parallel reading of other works by Henri Michaux, in order to be permeated with his poetic world, thus favouring a whole unconscious approach, also likely to orientate composition.

After using *L'infini turbulent*, it was highly tempting to go on a deeper investigation of the author's work.

From this wish originates the decision to approach the poem *Iniji*, extracted from *Moments, traversées du temps*<sup>15</sup>. Taking as a starting point the same linguistico-psychoanalytical method, I intend this year to adopt a not only musical but also theatrical form of writing (with light scenography, the electronic treatment of sound) in order to reveal with still more evidence and force the flux of the text.

Clara Maïda, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1999

<http://www.claramaida.com>

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<sup>15</sup> Henri Michaux, *Moments, traversées du temps*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973