

Gerard Grisey *Quatre Chants pour franchir le seuil*

Gerard Grisey 1946-98 is another composer whose musical life has been dedicated to an intensive search for an original language. Applying a refined, intellectual approach to the study of acoustics and electronic music, Grisey was a founder member (with Tristan Murail) of *L'itinéraire*, a group of composers who produced the first pieces of 'Spectral Music'. This expression refers to their musical and philosophical approach to composition, accepting individual sounds not as objects within a system (such as tonality or twelve-tone music) but as "being living objects with a birth, lifetime and death". Grisey himself felt that 'spectralism' was not a true description of his later style, though he remained preoccupied with the original statements of the movement and particularly with the relationship of the audience with the composer. In order for an audience to understand his own music, Grisey's aim was to establish "the rules of the game" so that the listener should discover a thread which helps them through the labyrinth. This meant a number of tricks involving repetition, also a deep awareness of musical ideas in time, to provide points of reference. He also considered composers to be roughly divided into two main groups: one had a declamatory, dramatic style, a "music of discourse"; the other, (with which he considered himself to be a member), he described more as a state of sound, than a discourse- such as some Renaissance polyphonic composers "whose music says "This is the World"".

Gerard Grisey studied with a number of composers, though he considered Messiaen (in terms of colour) and Stockhausen (for his skill in form and time) to be his primary influence. Through the 'spectral' movement and his own experimentation Grisey was able to reexamine the nature of consonance and dissonance, with particular regard to the natural harmonics inherent in a musical tone and the use of quarter-tones. This skill in the exploration of harmonics brings a distinctive personality to his music, also a sense of deep calm and stretching of time within a structure. *Quatre Chants pour franchir le seuil*, for voice and 15 musicians, was completed shortly before the composer's death (he was unable to hear the first performance in London 1999), is scored for a large percussion section, including 15 gongs, 4 steel drums and 2 tam-tams; saxophones, tubas, clarinets (including two bass-clarinets and one contrabass) harp, 'cello and double-bass are divided into three groups on stage, each one with a percussionist; these groups are set behind a front row of trumpet, soprano, violin and flute. An additional note to the scoring is that the two tenor saxophones are tuned a quarter-tone flat, while the cello's C-string is tuned down to B-flat.

The title translates as 'four songs for crossing the threshold' and these four songs, each separated by interludes in which Grisey is able to repeat motifs from earlier in the piece, draw on several literary sources. The four songs deal

with the deaths of an angel, civilisation, the voice and humanity respectively: the first is set to a poem by Guez Ricord (*The Hours of Night*); the second, quotes from an archaeological catalogue of the *Egyptian Sarcophagi of the Middle Empire*; the third, is a fragment from the Greek poetess Erinna c.350 B.C. (she is said to have died aged 19); the fourth, an extract describing the deluge from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. While most of the music (despite it's imposing percussion) is extremely delicate, the final song, having initially depicted the ferocious storm of the *Epic*, now describes in a lullaby the peacefulness and beauty of the earth after the flood. In Grisey's own words, this was "Music for the dawn of a humanity finally disencumbered of the nightmare".

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1. Prélude

D'après 'Les heures à la nuit' de Guez Ricord

*De qui se doit
de mourir
comme ange*

...

*comme il se doit de mourir
comme un ange
je me dois
de mourir
moi même*

*il se doit son mourir
son ange est de mourir
comme il s'est mort
comme un ange*

Interlude

2. D'après 'Les sarcophages égyptiens du moyen empire'

Interlude

3. D'après 'Erinna'

*Dans le monde d'en bas, l'écho en vain dérive,
Et se tait chez les morts. La voix s'épand dans l'ombre*

Faux interlude

4. D'après 'L'épopée de Gilamesh'

*...Six Jours et sept nuits,
Bourrasques, Pluies battantes,
Ouragans et Déluge
Continuèrent de saccager la terre.
Le septième jour arrivé,
Tempête, Déluge et Hécatombe cessèrent,
Après avoir distribué leurs corps au hasard,
Comme une femme dans les douleurs,
La Mer se calma et s'immobilisa.*

*Je regardai alentour:
Le silence régnait!
Tous les hommes étaient
Retransformés en argile;
Et la plaine liquide
Semblait une terrasse.*

*J'ouvris une fenêtre
Et le jour tomba sur ma joue.
Je tombai à genoux, immobile,
Et pleurai...
Je regardai l'horizon de la mer, le monde...*