

SYLVIO GUALDA

In conversation with JONATHAN HEPFER (Nice, France - 2011)

Another piece I wanted to ask you about was 'May' by Nyguyen Thien Dao. I have never heard of anybody performing this piece in recent memory, and it seems like a shame, because the piece is quite strong.

Yes. I agree. Nguyen Thien Dao was a French-Vietnamese composer, and May was a very poetic piece. The piece is really worth knowing. It came about thanks to Messiaen.

One day, Messiaen came to my studio, and he brought a young man with him and said, "this man will be a great composer. He's one of my most brilliant students. I would like to propose that he write a piece for you." And I said, "ah, merci, Maître!" And with that introduction, I was very happy.

So, Nguyen Thien Dao and I had a meeting, and he said, "I would like to write you a long piece!" Suddenly, I became a bit nervous. One has to beware, no? Marius Constant had written a very long piece, and it worked, but you have to be careful. The 14 Stations is thirty-five minutes or so, but thankfully, it is great.

And Nguyen said, "I would like to write a piece with an éclatement at the end." And you can find this piece on my second record, along with Psappha, if you can find it in a record shop. The piece ends with an éclatement, but otherwise, from the beginning to the end, the piece stays between silence and mezzo forte at the maximum. It's a beautiful, poetic piece. Voilà.

He made a mixture of the European culture of Messiaen with his own culture, which was Vietnamese. I played this piece a lot.

Speaking again about expression – voilà – May was a poetic piece. I had to learn to slow down my motions, because I played with a sense of nervousness at first. Nguyen Thien Dao didn't know how to play percussion, and sometimes I would ask him what he meant by this or that in the score. And although he could only play percussion poorly, he had a way of demonstrating things that was much slower than the way I had been playing.

And he told me, "I had the idea of writing you the piece, because whenever I watched you play, I notice that when you make a sound, we, the audience always feel it, because we can hear that the sound is prepared. Even when you play quickly, one sees that you prepare the sound." This aspect of my playing impressed him very much.

I played like that because it came naturally. I never studied the way I did things. I just did them. But after I did things, I would go back and analyze them. And when a student would ask me about my way of playing, I studied what I was doing, and I tried to transmit the knowledge, because I always wanted young people to benefit from the things I had to learn myself. Anyone who grows old and keeps that type of information for himself, I believe is very selfish.

It was thanks to Nguyen Thien Dao that I learned to relax in performance. Because he wrote sometimes very, very slow music. And, contrary to all of my preconceptions about playing percussion, in the end, that is what he called "virtuosity."

This is perhaps a little bit like the Japanese Noh theater. The virtuosity of slowness.

Yes. Very, slow. Very slow. But in Noh theater, there are many silences. However, in May, there is a continuo, so something is always happening. There are silences, but throughout the piece, there are little things to shake, things that connect the phrases. This material connects the passages of the gongs, the metals, and the skins. There's also a part with the inside of a prepared piano that I had to work very hard on. I had to find the sounds, inside that instrument, which was actually the thing that ended up costing me the most time. We tried many things that didn't work before we were both happy with the piece. The work never ends when you collaborate with composers! (Laughter)