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Jérôme Berney

A composer and percussionist, born in 1971 in Vancouver (Canada), Jérôme Berney grew up in Lausanne (Switzerland). Piano at 7; drums at 10; a mother in the Ensemble Vocal de Lausanne; a passion for jazz since adolescence, and for reading too...

Today, Jérôme Berney creates blends, cross fertilisations, between jazz, classical, world music and poetry, generating unusual meetings between classical choirs and all types of instrumentalists, as in his African oratorio "Reine Pokou" (2017); his oriental Easter oratorio "Equinoxe" (2022); or his tableaux written for the Fête des Vignerons 2019 – a tradition classed as an intangible cultural heritage by Unesco – of which he was one of the three composers.

"Equinox Song", featured in this album, is an instrumental version of one of the melodies of "Equinox. Oratorio de Pâques" (Alain Rochat, text, Jérôme Berney, music). While bringing a touch of light, resurrection and spring, it can also be considered as a counterpoint to "Blue Stabat Mater" and "In the Fire".

"In the Fire" was commissioned by the Ledig-Rowohlt Foundation in Lavigny (Switzerland), a foundation which in its time welcomed the famous Lithuanian writer Tomas Venclova (1937-). Venclova is the very same author of the poem "In the Fire" which was to be set to music. The premiere was to take place on September 15, 2016. It was the occasion for a small musical and literary experiment: the poem was first read in Lithuanian and then slammed in French ("Dans les flammes", for voice and cajon). It was then finally sung in English in the version published here, for mixed choir and hang.

The idea of building “In the Fire” around and from the tones of the hang, (my hang in D minor should I specify, since there are hangs in different keys and with different notes), was inspired mainly by the incantatory and rhythmic aspect of the poem. The four-stanza structure of the poem also gave me the opportunity to approach the seven notes of my instrument from different harmonic angles. This constraint turned to be very inspirational. Thus, “In the Fire” is probably one of the first pieces, if not the very first one, for hang and choir.

This specificity gave wings to the work often sung by *Voix de Lausanne*, directed by Charlotte Thibaud and Dominique Tille in Switzerland. It also enabled “In the Fire” to be performed in Vilnius in 2017 on the occasion of Tomas Venclova’s 80th birthday.

While composing the music for the tableau “Larmes” on the occasion of the 2019 *Fête des Vignerons* (Vevey, Switzerland), I took up again the idea of building that piece of music around the same hang.



Out of the blue

Christ on the cross, St John on his left,
Mary on his right.

Amongst the many depictions of Stabat
Mater, Gentile da Fabriano's, painted around
1400-1410, stands out from the others
because of Mary's unconventional posture.
Face raised, she looks at her son; her
poignant expression tells of a pain that she
does not try to hide by either lowering her
head or burying it in her hands or the fabric
of her dress.

She stands upright, fully embracing what is
happening, arms open.

When Jérôme Berney begins to compose his
Stabat Mater, he is seated at his piano.
Facing him is this medieval poem written in
Latin.

He reads of the tragedy, the sorrow and the
loss.

From his fingers, the first notes are born,
a brusque, heart-rending and open motif.
Some time before, the fortuitous discovery
of Karl Jenkins's Stabat Mater had piqued

his curiosity; why not offer a new setting for these words? Since its creation in the middle of the XIII century, by the Franciscan Jacopone da Todi, this sacred text has inspired more than 500 musical Stabat Mater from all around the world.

A text which has the strength to travel through the ages. The historian in Jérôme Berney vibrates.

If the original aim of these twenty tercets is to stimulate a new piety, more empathetic and emotive, allowing the believer to feel the human pain of a mother—characteristic trait of the marital cult booming at the time—, they profoundly affect the musician. Raised by women, his mother and grandmother, he does not hide his deep affinity with the female with which he walks and infuses his works.

Hence, this Blue Stabat Mater is one of the sections that will form a triptych, the other two being the Mater Dolorosa (2014, text François Debluë) and the African oratorio Reine Pokou (2017, text Véronique Tadjo).

A triptych that one could imagine being like an echo, undoubtedly unconscious, of the three current artistic representations of a grieving Virgin Mary: the Stabat Mater, Mater Dolorosa and the Pietà.

“It came, how it came” says the composer. A process more intuitive than conceptual, to which is added the strata and echoes of the maturing world.

It is not by chance that this composition has seven parts: a number that is not only very symbolic, but that also perhaps recalls the Seven Sorrows of Mary.

Pain, gentleness and tears are at the heart of this work which combines jazz with choral song, tradition. A musical dialogue that Jérôme Berney has pursued for some years.

For this Blue Stabat Mater, a reminiscence continues to provide an impetus: Duruflé's Requiem populated with Gregorian resonances with which the composer is going to invigorate the score for the choir. The vocal soloist is a bass. The writing

in A minor gives life to the Arabic sounds brought by the soprano saxophone, double bass and percussion.

Pounding, fluidity, binary, ternary, harmony: words which have no meaning unless they are unmuted and put back into action in the experience of listening to this work.

A souvenir of his intact discovery, at the Eglise St-François, Lausanne, in October 2015.

If it is about the pain of a mother faced with the death of her son, half man, half God, it is also about each one of us, about our human condition in its disconcerting finiteness. Embarkation in medias res. All the world is on a journey.

The choir's voices express the powerlessness against the inevitable. They endure the unbearable without straining, an abandonment to death. Salt of grief, the raw essence.

Punctuating this litany of tears, the bass voice surges from the depth of the abysses, vertically; if the momentum comes from the

bottom and goes toward the top, it knocks down rather than raises up.

Odoriferous humus, death to the work which the jazz section comes to illuminate and lighten. The voice of the heavenly saxophone, the free pulsations of the double bass, the percussive swing create a place other than terrestrial space-time.

A breath.

The end of the Blue Stabat Mater goes into a decrescendo. It does not ring out the Paradisi Gloria (the glory of Paradise) in a radiant or victorious colour, and one finishes on the edge of a void outlining a few steps from a Dance of Death.

Some years later, listening to this piece again, the infinitesimal presence of the breath still resists the void. Blue breath.

Preface by Florence Grivel to the edition of the Blue Stabat Mater by the Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire de Lausanne (BCUL, 2021).

Translation: Kate Espasandin and Jill Wagg





photo: ©Lauren Pasche



Out of the blue

Le Christ en croix, saint Jean à sa gauche, Marie à sa droite.

Parmi les nombreuses représentations du Stabat Mater, celle peinte par Gentile Fabriano vers 1400-1410 se démarque des autres par la posture non conventionnelle de Marie.

Le visage levé, elle regarde son fils; son expression poignante dit une douleur qu'elle ne cache pas en baissant la tête, l'enfouissant dans ses mains ou dans le tissu de sa robe.

Elle se tient debout, vivant pleinement ce qui est, les bras ouverts.

Lorsque Jérôme Berney commence à composer son Stabat Mater, il est assis à son piano. Face à lui, ce poème médiéval écrit en latin. Il lit le tragique, l'affliction, la perte.

Sous ses doigts naissent les premières notes, motif enlevé, déchirant et ouvert.

Quelque temps auparavant, la découverte fortuite du Stabat Mater de Karl Jenkins pique sa curiosité; pourquoi ne pas consacrer à ces mots un nouvel écrin ?

Depuis sa création au milieu du XIII^e siècle par le franciscain Jacopone da Todi, ce texte sacré a inspiré plus 500 Stabat Mater musicaux provenant du monde entier. Un texte qui possède la force de traverser les âges.

L'historien qui est en Jérôme Berney vibre. Si, à l'origine, ces vingt tercets visent à stimuler une nouvelle piété, plus empathique, émotive, permettant au croyant de ressentir la douleur humaine d'une mère, – identification caractéristique du culte marital en effervescence à l'époque –, ils touchent en profondeur le musicien. Elevé par des femmes, sa mère et sa grand-mère, il ne cache pas son affinité profonde avec le féminin avec lequel il chemine et dont il infuse ses œuvres. Ainsi, ce Blue Stabat Mater est un des volets de ce qui s'avèrera être un triptyque, les deux autres étant le Mater Dolorosa (2014, texte François Debluë) et l'oratorio africain Reine Pokou (2017, texte Véronique Tadjo).

Triptyque qu'on pourrait imaginer comme un écho, sans doute inconscient, aux trois représentations artistiques courantes d'une Vierge Marie douloureuse, le Stabat Mater, la Mater Dolorosa et la Pietà.

« C'est venu, comme c'est venu » dit le compositeur.

Processus intuitif davantage que conceptuel, auquel s'ajoutent les strates et les échos du monde maturant en soi.

Pas un hasard si cette composition possède sept parties, chiffre non seulement ô combien symbolique, mais aussi rappel peut-être des Sept douleurs de Marie. Douleur, douceur et larmes sont au cœur de cette œuvre qui associe jazz et chant choral, tradition. Un dialogue musical que poursuit Jérôme Berney depuis bien des années.

Pour ce Blue Stabat Mater, l'aiguillon d'une réminiscence persiste, le Requiem de Duruflé habité de résonances grégoriennes dont le compositeur va innérer la partition pour le chœur. La voix soliste est une

basse, l'écriture en la mineur donne de la vie aux sonorités arabisantes portées par le saxophone soprano, la contrebasse et les percussions.

Martèlement, fluidité, binaire, ternaire, harmonie, des mots qui n'ont de sens que s'ils sont activés et remis en jeu dans l'expérience de l'écoute de cette œuvre. Souvenir de sa découverte intact, à l'Eglise St-François de Lausanne en octobre 2015. S'il s'agit de la douleur d'une mère face à la mort de son fils mi-homme, mi-Dieu, il s'agit aussi de chacun·e de nous, de notre condition humaine dans sa déconcertante finitude. Embarcation in media res. Tout le monde est du voyage.

Les voix du chœur expriment l'impuissance face à l'inéluctable, elles soutiennent l'insoutenable sans forcer, un abandon au trépas. Sel du chagrin, minéralité.

Ponctuant cette litanie des larmes, la voix de basse surgit du fond des abysses, verticale; si l'élan vient du bas et va vers le haut, il terrasse plutôt qu'il n'élève.

Humus odoriférant, la mort à l'ouvrage que vient éclaircir et alléger la section jazz.

La voix du saxophone céleste, les pulsations libres de la contrebasse, le swing percussif créent un autre lieu que l'espace-temps terrestre.

Un souffle.

La fin du Blue Stabat Mater va decrescendo, il ne fait pas sonner le Paradisi gloria (la gloire du Paradis) dans une couleur chatoyante ou victorieuse, on se quitte sur le bord du vide esquissant quelques pas d'une danse des morts. Quelques années plus tard, à la réécoute de cette pièce, la présence infime du souffle résiste toujours au néant. Blue breath.

Florence Grivel, janvier 2021

Discography

At VDE-Gallo

Songs of Lights
for jazz trio, hang and choral ensemble
Gallo CD 1671, 2022

3+3. Jazz autour de Ravel
for classical trio and jazz trio
Gallo CD-1655, 2021

je t'aime la terre
7 chants de la Fête des Vignerons 2019
for a cappella choir, piano and percussions
Gallo CD-1626, 2020

Fête des Vignerons 2019
Le spectacle.
Enregistrement live
for choir and various instrumental ensembles

Gallo CD-1612-1613, 2019

3+3. Jazz autour

de Frank Martin
for classical trio and jazz trio
Gallo CD-1330, 2010

At others distributors

Blue Flower Songs
for choir and jazz trio
Unit Records 4744, 2017

3+3. Jazz autour de Gabriel Fauré
for classical trio and jazz trio
Revue Oblique, 2012

Suite mordorée
for jazz trio
RecRec et Nocturne, 2005

Espèces d'espaces
for jazz trio
RecRec et Nocturne, 2002

Rêveries
for jazz quartet
Plainisphare, 1998



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Gallo CD-1671

