

L'Arbre des songes (Tree of Dreams): Concerto for Violin and Orchestra

HENRI DUTILLEUX

Born

January 22, 1916, in Angers, France

Resides

in Paris

Work composed

1979–85, on a commission from Radio France; slight alterations effected in April 1998; it is dedicated to Isaac Stern

World premiere

November 5, 1985, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, Isaac Stern, soloist, Lorin Maazel conducting the Orchestre National de France

New York Philharmonic premiere

these concerts

Estimated duration

ca. 25 minutes

Henri Dutilleux has always resisted classification as a composer, and the cryptic style he often adopts when discussing his own works has not done much to help listeners grasp the essence of his art. “It seems to me very hubristic for an artist to want to define his aesthetic,” Dutilleux has said. “Building up a body of work is a long process, consisting mainly of trial and error, and many years must pass before one achieves the distance, the detachment, the perspective which allows one to distinguish the broader lines of development.” Ultimately, one’s understanding of a composer’s work depends on hearing the music more than hearing what he has to say about it. Interested music lovers can at least

acquaint themselves with Dutilleux’s output quickly, since he has been parsimonious in his production.

Although he is now approaching his 90th birthday, and although he has composed steadily throughout his adult life, Dutilleux’s catalogue is slender indeed. He suppressed most of his earliest works, essentially beginning to chart his mature compositions with his Piano Sonata (1946–48, written for his wife, Geneviève Joy). He has since produced nine symphonic works (including two symphonies and two concertos – one for cello, the other for violin, which is the work performed tonight), a few works for the stage (ballet or theater), and a handful of keyboard, chamber, and vocal pieces.

Dutilleux’s oeuvre may be modest in quantity, but it is impressive for its quality, which is everywhere marked by meticulous attention to detail. He is admired internationally as a senior eminence of French music, and has been acknowledged with an extraordinary lineup of honors and awards, including the French Grand Prix National de la Musique (1967), the Koussevitzky International Recording Award (1976), the Prix International Maurice Ravel (1987), and Japan’s Premium Imperiale (1994). He has served as a member of the Conseil International de la Musique of UNESCO, is an associate member of the Royal Academy of Belgium, and in 1981 was inducted as an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in New York.

Dutilleux was born in Angers, in the Loire valley, where his family had sought refuge during World War I. When he was a small child his family moved back to their ancestral city of Douai, in northern France near the Belgian border. His family

In the Composer's Words

Henri Dutilleux has discussed *L'Arbre des songes* (*Tree of Dreams*):

Trying to write for a great soloist without making sacrifices to pure virtuosity, and the problem of bringing out the solo instrument whilst trying to get away from classical and romantic patterns, make the modern composer's task rather difficult. For there is a convention in the concerto genre which puts the composer in a slightly ambiguous position. Even with a close study of Paganini's *Capriccios*, Ysaÿe's sonatas, and many of Enesco's scores, I personally still felt incapable of writing a bravura piece. I have therefore attempted to solve these problems in a more internal fashion, with a solo instrument which is closely dependent on its orchestral environment, and the soloist and orchestra being animated by the same rhythmic pulse.

With *Métaboles*, *Tout un monde lointain*, and *Ainsi la nuit*, I started to move away, whenever possible, from the other convention of splitting a work into movements separated by pauses, which, in certain cases, seems to me to impair the power of "enchantment." As to form, the present work has similarities with its predecessors; its four structural parts are linked to one another by three orchestral interludes of differing characters and styles — the first is pointillist, the next monodic, and the last has a very still beginning. As for the solo part, it is not at all passive during these stretches; at the end of the second interlude it grafts itself onto the orchestra in parallel. Indeed, this parallel role becomes very obvious in the



Dutilleux at the New York Philharmonic in 2003

central episode of the work (the slow movement), where the oboe d'amore and the solo violin reflect one another in a play of mirror images. The same applies to the cimbalom's entries, which are more discrete, yet important for the touches of color they lend to the work.

Besides this, there is a group of instruments which forms a homogeneous block and which plays an organic role within the piece. These are members of the keyboard family: glockenspiel, vibraphone, piano/celesta, to which are added the harp and now and then the crotales; all these instruments are treated in a percussive, "tinkling" way. Their function is one of structural order, in the sense that they enunciate, by deforming, the melodic contour which runs through the whole of the work and which forms a sort of central core to the solo part itself.

was inclined toward cultural pursuits: his great-grandfather was a painter who counted Corot and Delacroix among his friends; his maternal grandfather was a composer and organist who had been a teacher of Roussel; and an uncle was a translator of Shakespeare's plays.

Dutilleux began his musical training at the local music school in Douai, and in 1933 left for Paris, where he spent five years at the Conservatoire studying composition with Henri Busser. He won the Prix de Rome in 1938, on his third attempt. Although it didn't hurt to have this traditional stamp of approval on his résumé, he was deprived of much of its benefit when the outbreak of war ended his residency in Rome after only four months. Drafted into the French Army, Dutilleux served as a medical orderly for a year before being reassigned to civilian posts, which included stints as a teacher of harmony, as chorus master at the Opéra de Paris (for a few months), and as an arranger of music for nightclubs. During the war years he advanced his education

by privately studying Vincent d'Indy's celebrated textbook, *Cours de composition musicale*; it was only after the war that he became closely acquainted with branches of musical modernism such as those represented by Bartók and by the composers of the Second Viennese School, both of which influenced him to some degree. Between 1945 and 1963 he was active with the O.R.T.F. (French Radio) as director of musical production, and he has taught composition at the École Normale de Musique and the Paris Conservatoire, but most of his time has been given over to composition.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, three oboes (one doubling oboe d'amore), two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, tam-tams, crotales, tubular bells, orchestra bells, vibraphone, bongos, tom-toms, snare drum, cimbalom, piano (doubling celesta), harp, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

What's in a Name?

About the title of *L'Arbre des songes*, Henri Dutilleux has written:

All in all the piece grows somewhat like a tree, for the constant multiplication and renewal of its branches is the lyrical essence of the tree. This symbolic image, as well as the notion of a seasonal cycle, inspired my choice of *L'Arbre des songes* as the title of the piece.

This composer is known to revere the work of Vincent van Gogh. He has identified the painting titled *Road with Cypress and Star* as one of his favorites, and has said that it both fascinated and haunted him. "While entirely rejecting any notion of merely making necessarily ineffectual musical versions of the paintings," Dutilleux has written, "it has seemed to the composer that the intense pulsation that is the life of van Gogh's canvases, the sense of space that dominates them, the trembling quality of the material, and, above all, the effect of quasi-cosmic swirling the paintings give off, could indeed have their counterparts in sound."



Van Gogh's *Road with Cypress and Star* (1890)