

HENRI DUTILLEUX: An Appreciation

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Henri Dutilleux has long resisted classification as a composer, and although interviewers have repeatedly pressed him to describe his style, he dependably demurs. “It seems to me very hubristic for an artist to want to define his aesthetic,” he once responded. “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.”

In the end, Dutilleux always seems to avoid articulating those “broader lines” in much detail. One suspects that his reticence partly involves an unwillingness to commit to a description that might suggest a doctrinaire streak, since he has never adhered to any school of composition, espoused any specific method, or joined with colleagues to promote a manifesto or proclaim an aesthetic stance on the nuts and bolts of composing. In his oeuvre, the music finds its way without the benefit of preconceptions: where it leads is unpredictable. “With each new work,” he said, “I try and go a little further and not to repeat myself. So, instinctively, I take a different direction from the one everyone was expecting.” When he does speak about his music, he seems to prefer sticking to practical, verifiable observations without yielding to high-blown posturing. “You know,” he told the journalist Claude Glayman, “there are many moments when a composer is prey to doubts. You then have to keep working until the path becomes clear and you can say: ‘Ah! That’s the way I can express myself,’ and if you manage to realize what was in your mind, then you’re happy.”

Ultimately, one’s understanding of a composer’s work depends on hearing the music more than hearing what he has to say about it. Music lovers can acquaint themselves with Dutilleux’s output in rather little time, since he has been parsimonious in his production. Although he is approaching his 96th birthday and has composed steadily throughout his adult life, his catalogue is slender. He suppressed most of his earliest works, essentially began charting his mature compositions with his Piano Sonata (written for his wife, Geneviève Joy, in 1946–48), and since then has produced only about a dozen symphonic works (including two symphonies and two concertos, one for cello, the other for violin), a few works for the stage (ballet or theater), and a handful of keyboard, chamber, and vocal pieces.

This modest output — modest in quantity, though not in quality — is nonetheless deceptive. His biographer Caroline Potter reports, “Dutilleux has said that, contrary to what may be assumed by glancing at his catalogue, he actually writes a great deal, but uses only a small percentage of the material.” For him, composing is a process of refinement. It is not easy to invent in the first place, but to reject much of what one has created is an anguish reserved for the greatest artists. For Dutilleux, it defines the process of composition: he hones his material ceaselessly, pitilessly, leaving not the slightest trace of self-indulgence. Every measure of a Dutilleux composition has been put through the crucible. Every measure has survived the refiner’s fire. “It’s through the act of writing that a style emerges, often even including mistakes along the way — which are also necessary,” he told Glayman.

Despite this process of meticulous craftsmanship and obsessive reworking — or, more likely, because of it — Dutilleux’s compositions sound fresh, lithe, and vibrant with motion. It seems almost paradoxical that his exorbitantly disciplined approach should yield music that sounds so spontaneous. He told his biographer Pierrette Mari, “I sense that two elements of my nature oppose one another: on one hand, freedom of expression, curiosity about everything that is unusual; on the other, an innate tendency to surround my thought in a framework that is formal, precise, uncluttered, strict.” This is perhaps as close as Dutilleux comes to defining his musical style; it resides somewhere in the balance between those conflicting inclinations. His sounds leap off the page in exquisitely calibrated textures, entrancing the ear with their beauty even when embodying undercurrents of violence.

“In my own case,” the composer allows, “instrumental color is very important, and that is perhaps why I’m always happy to write for orchestra.” He is one of the finest orchestral composers working today, and his symphonic writing shows an unusual degree of imagination, uncovering unanticipated sonic effects through unprecedented combinations of instrumental timbres or through the timbral tension that occurs when a single instrumental line is cast into momentary opposition with an orchestral section. His scores are challenging, but they repay the effort they demand of the performers. The New York Philharmonic has performed nine of his orchestral works so far.

It would not be wrong to say that Dutilleux is a partisan of “art for art’s sake.” He has never shown the slightest inclination to write music that would patently cater to commercial potential or popular acclaim. It may therefore perhaps be a happy coincidence that his native sound nonetheless seduces the ear as it does. He proves generous to his listeners without ever compromising his art. In fact, audiences may find themselves drawn in even before the music begins, thanks to the seductive titles the composer attaches to his compositions and to their individual movements, intriguing names like *L’Arbre des songes* (*The Tree of Dreams*), *Mystère de l’instant* (*Mystery of the Moment*), *Ainsi la nuit* (*Thus the Night*), and *The Shadows of Time*. These titles never seem like ancillary afterthoughts: they conjure up a shadowy atmosphere, a world of wonder that is elementally conveyed in his poetic scores.

He has never courted fame, but the quality of his work has earned him a succession of international honors at the highest level. In naming Henri Dutilleux the first recipient of The Marie-Josée Kravis Prize for New Music at the New York Philharmonic, the Orchestra applauds him for the refined scores he has created so far, it thanks him for the satisfaction his music has provided to the New York Philharmonic’s musicians and audiences, and it celebrates the exacting standards his music will inspire in generations of composers yet to come.