

Alain Bioteau interviews **Pedro Amaral**

Translation by Caroline Beamish

Alain Bioteau: There's something wild and rugged about ...*Textos*..., "opus 1" in your catalogue, which we do not find later. To what do you attribute this ruggedness and the later development?

Pedro Amaral: ...*Textos, Paráfrases, Perspectivas*... occupies a special place in my output, it's true. Other pieces preceded it, but I finally decided to keep this as my "opus 1", although it's an apprentice piece. I composed a first version in 1993, at the end of my studies at the Music Academy in Lisbon. The piece was already in the form it's in now: the two piano cadenzas (the two "Texts") at the beginning and end, forming a kind of frame, and between them the fully scored section develops the basic chord that has been heard repeatedly throughout the cadenzas.

So this piece coincided with the end of my studies in Lisbon. But at the same time I was preparing for my admission to the Conservatoire in Paris; for one of the tests I had to present to the selection panel a recording of a piece I had composed. None of the pieces I had composed had ever been performed in public, much less recorded. So in the spring of 1994 I organised my first concert, creating an ensemble with my co-students at the Lisbon Academy; I conducted and recorded the piece for radio myself.

As you know, the teaching of composition in Portugal has come on a lot, as has the equipment available in our conservatoires. When I was a student we learned our craft by the old fashioned method – with paper, pencil and eraser. Our compositions were never played and we only heard them in our heads.

This concert, and this recording, represented a defining moment for me because it was the first time I had been "physically" exposed to my own work. It was an extraordinary experience – I remember it as if it was yesterday: many of its aspects seemed to present a natural confirmation. The harmony, for example, and the whole rhythmic component came as no surprise to me, in the sense that I had "heard" them perfectly in my head. On the other hand other aspects seemed insufficiently elaborated – the instrumental layout, for instance, and above all the formal balance of the piece.

So when I arrived in Paris in 1994 I decided to spend months and months reworking the piece – more than a year in the end. I developed it a lot. I think that the formal proportions work much better now and, in general, I think I've found a certain equilibrium in the full score writing, between very rigorous, restrictive writing and much less controlled compositional freedom.

The reason this piece means such a lot to me is that it formed the basis of my apprenticeship in music. In some ways this piece “taught” me to compose, I learned through it. At the same time it testifies to a time when I was experiencing terrific tension between a certain idea of writing, from the technical point of view, and shall we say my personality. I felt as if I were both the lion and the lion-tamer. I think the wild, rugged quality you noticed in the work comes from that violent inner tension. You are right that this ruggedness has disappeared from my work over the years, for one reason or another.

Alain Bioteau: Would you like it to return?

Pedro Amaral: I am busy retrieving it at the moment, but in a different way, perhaps with a different meaning (from a psychological point of view). On the other hand, if this ruggedness is so evident in ... *Textos*... it is first of all because I was busy forging my own technique and had not quite mastered it. That is why everything is so exposed. In my subsequent pieces, for example *Spirales*, I forced myself to bring certain aspects of this technique to as steady a state of equilibrium as possible – harmonic development, orchestration, even the “sonority” of each phrase (as a writer might term it). Everything became much subtler, more polished, more finished. The need to improve my technique brought about this perceptible transformation in my style.

Now, however, more than ten years after ... *Textos*..., the stability of my technique is beginning to cramp my style badly. I feel as if I had reached a point when I need to start again from scratch. The ruggedness (as you called it) is emerging again, and I am perfectly aware of it, for example in my *Abstract* for solo oboe. But is it as obvious to the listener as it is to me?

Alain Bioteau: On that subject, when you hear *Spirales* and *Organa*, two pieces that seem to be aesthetically very close to one another, the transparency of the orchestration is particularly attractive. If such a question can be generalised, what are you looking for primarily when you are working on tonal quality?

Pedro Amaral: I'd say that as a composer tone is my particular means of building up “sonority”; you could talk about the “sonority” of an instrumentalist or a conductor in the same way. I am extremely sensitive to the question of sonority, and this by the way is why I cannot think about orchestration without also thinking about harmony and counterpoint. To give you an example, the final bars of *Spirales* have their own very particular harmonic reading, which is strangely mobile because of the orchestration and the dynamics. And in sections of *Organa* I have written a series of playful passages around the most rigorous, often canonical, counterpoint in which the intersection of abstract lines is reinterpreted by the way the instrumental lines are composed. There are various levels, one on top of the other, between the strands of the writing and the colours that embody them – as if you were drawing a tree with its wealth of spreading branches and you used coloured pencils to sketch in the subtle relationship

between one branch and the next. I have no general theory about orchestration. What I can tell you is that the instrumental invention forms such an active, fundamental part of my work that I spend ten times as much time composing the orchestration as I spend on creating the harmonic or rhythmic components of the music. And as the years go by this gets worse and worse... (laughter).

Alain Bioteau: In two of your ensemble pieces (... *Textos*... and *Paraphrase*) the piano occupies a particularly privileged though slightly isolated place. You also emphasised the fact earlier on that in ... *Textos*... the piano exposes the text. What in your view is expressed in this way? Or, if we wanted to discuss it psychoanalytically, who finds expression in this voice?

Pedro Amaral: Me, of course (laughter).

But the question is more complex and difficult than that, because the piano has been an extremely important instrument for me at various levels. When I was a child I lived alone with my mother, and for years our apartment was almost empty, except for the bare necessities. But there was a piano, because that was a bare necessity for my mother. I began playing at about seven or eight, and that piano has accompanied me throughout my life. I think it has become a symbolic feature of my affective landscape, and it is true to say that the instrument often fulfils a structuring function in my work. On the other hand it has always been connected with my mother's gaze; my mother is very affectionate but also extremely critical. I never play the piano in public, even when she is not there, because I can sense her gaze and it paralyses me. I can play other instruments, like the synthesizer, and indeed I do play it in Peter Eötvös's *Atlantis*. I adore doing this. But not the piano, out of some kind of primeval inhibition. So if I sometimes write fairly virtuoso pieces for this instrument, even pieces that stretch its technical capabilities to the limits, as in ... *Textos*..., this may perhaps be a way of compensating myself; as if, as a composer, I was trying to dominate an instrument which I have not managed to master entirely as a performer.

Alain Bioteau: The titles of your works (two of which are presented on this recording) relate directly to the idea of writing and text. More precisely, there is a kind of distance here from an earlier state, a distance which could be expressed as a paraphrase. How do you evaluate this attitude in relation to the *Commentaires* introduced by Boulez into his *Marteau sans Maître*?

Pedro Amaral: Obviously Boulez's work represents a fundamental historical antecedent, probably the most defining antecedent in my genealogy. Nevertheless his influence over me was very general; for example, it never exerted any specific technical influence over me. If you want a more rigorous analysis, the question of the commentary in the work of Boulez arises from the real need to reconquer areas of liberty and subjectivity within an extremely restrictive and objective style of writing. Indeed from this angle, during the 1950s, the commentary in Boulez's work corresponds exactly to the "inserts" in the work

of Stockhausen (only during the 1950s, as I said, not afterwards). The inserts in *Gruppen*, which interrupt the serial structure, open up (just as do certain sections of commentary in *Marteau*) a space in which the composer enjoys more freedom than elsewhere in the writing. In fact, the movements entitled *Commentaire* carry this problem much further because they constitute a kind of formal variation; it is no longer simply a question of specifically localised freedom since they constitute almost a formal overture, in the broadest sense, which is developed later in the *Third Sonata*.

In my case, I think this question has different roots. In my work the paraphrase does not represent the need to open a subjective space within the writing; the writing today is much more flexible than it was half a century ago. Nor does it correspond to a latent need for a formal opening which we still had to cope with in the early fifties; on the contrary, it corresponds to a tendency to create closed forms, developing like spirals from within themselves.

The first time this appeared in my work was indeed in *Spirales*. In fact I set myself the problem of form as a question in itself. What type of form to adopt? What lines to develop it along? And why to choose one type of form rather than another? For what convincing architectonic reasons, I mean, if we consider its coherence with the rest of my language. By the way, these questions had been in the air but unaddressed for decades: a lot has been written about the need for open forms, and their arrival, but when forms closed up again at the end of the 1960s no-one analysed the phenomenon in any depth.

The idea of a paraphrastic thought came to me as a possible response to the problem of formal generation. My idea could be summed up as follows: as well as in respect of different pitches, for example, my language revolves via the permanent expansion of elements in melodic and harmonic space; form has to evolve through expansion zones, where the material undergoes a transformation over time. This is the idea behind *Spirales*: I begin with a tiny nucleus of chords which is reinterpreted each time, transformed, enlarged and multiplied. Each new stage of the transformation corresponds to a new section in the form in which I try out a new and different musical incarnation of the same abstract material.

It is paraphrasing, of course, but at a genetic and fundamental level. It is not a commentary on existing material; if you like you could think of it as an elementary DNA being progressively transformed via transformations which entail a concrete type of expansion and formal development.

Alain Bioteau: These ideas about DNA and molecular elements in music remind me of your theoretical work in which you tackled one of the symbolic figures of twentieth-century music, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and serial music of the period of *Gruppen* and *Momente*. How would you describe your relationship with the idea of system?

Pedro Amaral: I will begin by saying that I undertake theoretical work because the act, to me, and in particular the act of composition, is always accompanied by thought. I'm a bit of a Pessoa, if you like. I create and I watch myself create at the same time. I have an instinctive tendency to reflect on matters. Quite naturally, when I think of my music I think of it in relation to history, and in relation to my immediate predecessors. My reflections focus on the Darmstadt generation in particular because this has exerted far the strongest influence over contemporary musical thought, especially through the work and theoretical writing of Stockhausen and Boulez.

I could have written my thesis on Boulez, but I could not see any immediate advantage in this because I was already so familiar with his ideas. I thought it would be more useful to me, as a musician, to devote my studies to Stockhausen who had been less important to me during my training, and from whose music I felt more distant. This is quite paradoxical because in human terms I am very close to him. I spend long periods in his company, I've been his assistant in the past and, as a conductor, I often conduct his music. In spite of all this, I have not as a composer really been exposed to any direct influence.

As far as inheritance is concerned, I think there is too much of a tendency to talk about systems at a time when they no longer exist. Tonal music possesses an extremely logical and stable system in which all categories of language find their place. In the first half of the twentieth century we witnessed the dissolution of systems; the Darmstadt generation, in a historic synthesis, succeeded in reinstating a systematic, coherent language, category by category. Nevertheless this language, which was brilliant from a rational point of view, was also profoundly artificial – like those towns (Brasilia is an example) built on virgin terrain. They are brilliant as architectural and intellectual exercises, but not “existential”, if you understand what I am trying to say. In reality, the term system can only be applied to a very few works, like *Le Marteau*, the *Third Sonata* and, undoubtedly, *Gruppen*, which in many respects represents a kind of apotheosis of the system. And then suddenly – no more system, or almost none. *Momente* possesses a formal system and has subsystems to accompany it; *Pli selon Pli* remains a paradoxical piece because it is at the same time a masterpiece of serial music and one of its most powerful negations.

I believe that once the tonal universe had collapsed, no complete systems remained; more complex, and certainly more coherent languages remained. The deep coherence of tonality was based on the acoustic model; once such a model is abandoned I find it hard to see how a system could be imposed which was not artificial.

As far as I am concerned, I concentrate on maximum solidarity between the categories, and I continue doggedly to search for the intrinsic coherence between them. Just now I gave you the example of the harmonic and formal development in *Spirales*, and this could be used to illustrate my method of working on all

fronts. But even so, I certainly would not dare to claim to have a system, with all the historical overtones that that carries with it.

Alain Bioteau: To return to the implications behind your ideas in the pieces presented here, I should like you to talk to us about the opening of *Paraphrase*, which is marked by a persistent *ostinato*, plus a rapid beat which circulates polarities of pitch. Were you thinking of composing a sort of latter-day *courante*, like Magnus Lindberg in his piece *Corrente*?

Pedro Amaral: Not at all. Anyway, after Ingmar Bergman's sublime *Sarabande* in 2003, it would be daring to compose another *Courante* just two years later! (laughter)

Having said that, the first part of *Paraphrase* is in fact based on a kind of overpowering beat within a continuous temporal flux, but I believe that in order to understand the reasons behind this regular beat, the piece has to be examined in its entirety. It is divided into two large sections separated by a piano cadenza, followed by a *tutti* transition in which the instrumental voices begin to take on independent life. The two main parts last for roughly the same time and they complement and complete each other in many respects. The first part is distinguished by a strong collective and unified sense. In order to convey the meaning of this sense, I submitted the entire movement to the most unifying element that exists: beat, ever present, ever regular. The other half, conversely, is developed via a spacious trumpet solo, with interventions from the piano (the second soloist); this part is marked by highly individualised scoring and, of course, by rhythmic and temporal developments that appear to be very irregular.

If these two main sections really do contrast with one another and complement each other, it is also because the basic material is strictly similar in both. I began by working on the second half with the big trumpet solo. As in *Spirales*, but by a technically different process, I began with a small nucleus of only five notes, played by the soloist; then the five notes are transformed to eight, thirteen etc. constantly increasing and burgeoning into a vaster, more complex pattern. The interior structure of the trumpet leads to the formal development of this whole section – you can hear this when you listen to the piece.

When I later began composing the first part of the work I transcribed the trumpet's final solo, note for note, and I decided that the first section should contain the same melodic line played by the ensemble, not the soloist. In the first part we witness the composition of the "length of time" between each pair of notes, then we follow the final solo note by note via this regular rhythmical structure. As you can see, there are two different renderings of the same abstract material and, in both cases, different methods of transforming the material, of expanding it horizontally and vertically. In order to contrast them and make them complementary I organised things so that one part would be impelled by the ensemble writing and a very regular rhythmical scheme; by way of contrast, the

other part is driven by individual writing and a richer, more unpredictable rhythmical scheme.

Alain Bioteau: On the other hand, after the piano solo in *Paraphrase* there is a transition which leads to solo intervention by the trumpet. Is this a nod towards Beethoven's *Fifth*?

Pedro Amaral: I had not thought of that, so the answer is no – no nod. It is true that this sequence of three articulated notes recurs several times, but if you study it carefully it is there for a purpose, and a very genuine purpose. Just now you talked about the reiteration of the beat in the first part of the piece: this beat is almost always divided into threes. Then, in the second half, the tempo is relatively similar but the beat is no longer to be heard. What takes place over the transition is that the division into threes expands, the length between the notes grows longer and more varied until the beat dissolves. This is the sense of the intermediate section: between the first part, characterised by its perceptible beat, and the final part when you no longer hear the beat, you can observe the decomposition of the beat during the transition.

At the same time you can also hear the instrumental lines beginning to take on individual characteristics and this is accompanied by the piece broadening out generally: I view it as a kind of pathway between collective thought and existence, and more individual thought and existence. In fact, over the four parts of the piece you have the collective extreme at the beginning, followed by extreme individuality in the piano cadenza; then there is the transition when the collective gains equilibrium, each voice gradually emerging, participating in its own subjectivity but without overwhelming the other voices. This resolves at the end into equilibrium between the different degrees of individualisation in the score. The question of equilibrium between the individual and the collective has a certain importance for me – and the importance was surely uppermost in my mind when I composed this piece.

Alain Bioteau is both a composer and a musicologist who specialized in Emmanuel Nunes's work while researching into spatialization from the historical as well as from the analytical point of view. He has been teaching musical composition at the Nantes Cefedem since 2003 in a class dedicated to training teachers who will later work in schools of music. He is also a tutorial adviser for Ariam Île de France.