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The influence of Tibetan Buddhism in the work of Eliane Radigue

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Abstract

French electronic music composer Eliane Radigue studied electroacoustic music techniques at the Studio d'essai at the RTF, under the direction of Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry from 1957-58. In 1967-68 she worked again with Pierre Henry, as his assistant at the Studio Apsome. From 1970-71 Radigue worked for a year at the New York University School of the Arts. In 1973 she was in residence at the electronic music studios of the University of Iowa and California Institute of the Arts. Becoming a Tibetan Buddhist in 1975, Radigue went into retreat, and stopped composing for a time. When she took up her career again in 1979, she continued to work with the Arp synthesizer, which has become her signature. She composed *Triptych* for the Ballet Théâtre de Nancy (choreography by Douglas Dunn), *Adnos II*, and *Adnos III*. In 1984 Radigue received a 'bourse à la creation' from the French Government to compose *Songs of Milarepa*, and a 'commande de l'état' in 1986 for the continuation of the Milarepa cycle with *Jetsun Mila*. This presentation will follow and analyze the development of Eliane Radigue in her Buddhist inspired period from 1984 to 1993 and explore the realization of Tibetan Buddhist concepts in *Trilogie de la mort* (1988-1993), *Songs of Milarepa* (1984), *Jetsun Mila* (1986) and explain how her aesthetic points of view were influenced and transformed through these philosophical concepts.

1. Radigue's musical and technical approaches in electroacoustic and instrumental acoustic music

Eliane Radigue's musical conceptions are complex and her technical approaches have improved over the years. In her opinion music is close to the expression of Verlaine: "A women but never the same" and she tries to apply this concept to music as the best and most complete musical approach.

Her music notation system is a system of references and not a specific system of notation. In the first time she was experimenting with the Buchla in the USA but later she preferred the Arp synthesizer. To remember the evolution of her work she wrote schemes with the mix she decided to use. These schemes were destroyed by an inundation in her apartment and only one scheme is left of the time when Radigue used this notation system.

Today, Radigue's work has again improved and she is no longer writing any electroacoustic music but transferring the style and the slow modulation to an acoustic instrument and a player. This new evolution in her work is the big cycle *Occam Ocean* and is related to the writings of Guillaume Occam and his concept that the simplest is the best. The structure of the pieces is always composed by three different elements:

- The work is realized together by oral transmission with the player;
- A generic theme is decided together with the player;
- The aim is to emerge a structure in waves on the overtones without the fundamental sounds.

Different aspects are in common with her electroacoustic music as:

- The exploration of time by slowly modulating sounds;
- The refuse of a notational system;
- The research of the sound inside the sound by the overtones.

But some differences are also realizable, as the changes that are provided in the acoustic versions of Radigue's music are stronger in the versions with the instrumentalist than in the electroacoustic pieces. Besides, the electroacoustic and the acoustic music of Radigue have the same origins. The composer was really impressed by the interesting modulations in the classical music as a young student because when the modulation is well done it is achieved before you remark it. She tried to export this impression on her electroacoustic music and tried to modulate the sound so softly that it is even not in the perception of the listener that the music has improved. Through the research of the electroacoustic possibilities she tried to create a tonal and modal ambivalence.

2. Eliane Radigue and the Buddhism

In Radigue's work the Buddhism is very present and is well represented in her catalogue through *Trilogie de la mort* (1988-1993), *Songs of Milarepa* (1984) and *Jetsun Mila* (1986). To Radigue "Buddhism is something really personal and you cannot refer to your own religion to explain your music."¹ (Waschbüch & Radigue, 2015) The expression of what the composer found in Buddhism is "[...] not expressional in words."² Radigue explains that "[...] the religious element in the music of Bach is not the reference to Christianity in the music but is expressed by the music herself."³

Her three pieces need to be organized in different categories. In *Trilogie de la mort* (1988-1993) and *Jetsun Mila* (1986) the sound and color aspects are more predominant. As the texts are based on the life of Milarepa the text gained on importance and the music is only sustaining the power of the words: *Songs of Milarepa* (1984) is a really different type of conception compared to the two other pieces. That is why Radigue says about her relation on Buddhism and music: "Buddhism is in my music but I'm not talking about it. It's private."⁴

For the composer two directions have been important as the train rails. She considered Buddhism and Music as equal in their meaning so that they gained equal importance on her life. Therefore it is interesting to have a closer look on the three explicit Buddhist pieces in her oeuvre.

¹ Translated by Viviane Waschbüch. "Le bouddhisme est quelque chose de très personnel et on ne peut pas se référer à sa propre religion pour expliquer sa musique."

² *Ibid.* "[...] ne peut être exprimé en mots."

³ *Ibid.* "[...] l'élément religieux dans la musique de Bach n'est pas réalisé par la référence au christianisme mais exprimé par la musique elle-même."

⁴ *Ibid.* "Le bouddhisme est dans ma musique mais je ne parle pas de ce sujet. C'est privé."

3. The Buddhist references used in the pieces

The physiological and meditational aspect must be thought as a reference to the Buddhist tradition of emptiness. The success of her music can also be explained by the physiological aspect of this art that, even if the composer realizes it unconsciously, give the meditation result. Radigue's pieces are always narrative in the way that they are telling a mental story – like the reflection of an imaginary journey. Interesting is also the pulsation that is even present in the softest passages of the music but never predominantly obvious in the pieces. The heartbeat (and the pulsation that goes with it) has an important meaning in Tibetan traditional medicine.

The three pieces are music of the perception of a moment without a rupture by a pause because the sound and frequency modulation are replacing the harmonic modulation in the classical tradition. Eliane Radigue's music is asking a lot of patience from the audience and is in this way (by the non-intended waiting) pretty close to the Buddhist conception of interconnection between all elements. Listening to her music means waiting for the next impression and not actively following structural organizations. Even if the form of her music is not perceptible by a first listening it is possible to find a clear structure in her music that is close to the structures of classical forms.

4. *Trilogie de la mort* (1988-1993)

Inspired by Buddhist philosophy and mythology Radigue composed *Trilogie de la mort* inspired by the Bardö-Thödol – the Tibetan book of death. This cycle is organized in three major sections which she called chapters: I. *Kyema* (1988), II. *Kailasha* (1991) and III. *Koume* (1993). The first chapter *Kyema* is dedicated to her son Yves Arman who died in the year of composition of the piece. *Kyema* is a description of the six different stages that constitutes 'continuous existence' of the human being. That's why the piece has six sections related to the Buddhist concept of life and death: I. *Kyene* (birth), II. *Milam* (dream), III. *Samten* (meditation), IV. *Chikai* (death), V. *Chönye* – (bright light), VI. *Sippai* (transit and coming back).

The second chapter *Kailasha* is not directly linked to the Tibetan philosophy but is inspired by certain paintings of Albers and Escher in which space is explored in a logical and at the same time paradox way. The working title of the second chapter was *Hereafter* but Radigue changed her mind and decided to create a link in the title to the holy Mount Kailash, a holy mountain in the Himalayas, which is considered in Buddhist tradition as the place where the soul passes from one part of life to death.

Koume the third chapter is mostly inspired by the bible and by some quotations of sacred music. This third chapter is organized in four sections. The first section has the title of Psalm XXXIV "Human is only walking in appearance", the second section is a Latin quotation out of a Requiem Mass "*Qua resurget ex favilla judicandus homo reus*", the third section is inspired by the text of the St Matthew Passion "Have lightning and thunders their fury forgotten" and the last sections is imbued by the Corinthian XV "Death where is your victory?" Radigue explained that the title of the third chapter, *Koume*, is not a pre-existing Tibetan word: "It's not real Tibetan. *Me* means fire and *Kou* holy body. It does not exist in

Tibetan.”⁵ (Girard, 2013: 97) I’m analyzing *Kyema* from *Trilogie de la mort* by different categories that seem really important for the piece such as: time, structure and tonal elements.

TIME	PART
0’00 – 05’53	Introduction
05’54 – 07’04	Transition (1)
07’05 – 18’58	I. (<i>Kyene</i> = Birth)
18’59 – 20’45	Transition (2)
20’45 – 28’00	II. (<i>Milan</i> = Dream)
28’01 – 28’39	Transition (3)
28’40 – 37’05	III. (<i>Samten</i> = Meditation)
37’06 – 37’26	Transition (4)
37’27 – 45’32	IV. (<i>Chikai</i> = Death)
45’33 – 57’30	V. (<i>Chonye</i> = Bright Light)
57’31 – end	VI. (<i>Sippai</i> = Transit And Coming Back)

Table 1: Time structure of *Kyema* from *Trilogie de la mort*

The six constitutive sections of the piece described by Radigue were found in the analysis. What is really interesting is the fact that the different parts are separated and introduced by transitions to smoothen the passage of one element to the other. The different passages are all based on central pitches and the little overtone melodies developed in the piece. It is possible to describe all the little changes in Radigue’s music but it seems more logical for a good understanding of the piece to define larger passages (and to describe the evolution in these longer passages). The central pitches and major intervals in *Kyema* are very diverse. Seven central pitches (b-flat, d-flat, a, f, d, b, e-flat) are found in the tonal organization, and they are ornamented by other pitches mostly organized in seconds.

CENTRAL PITCHES AND INTERVALS in KYEMA

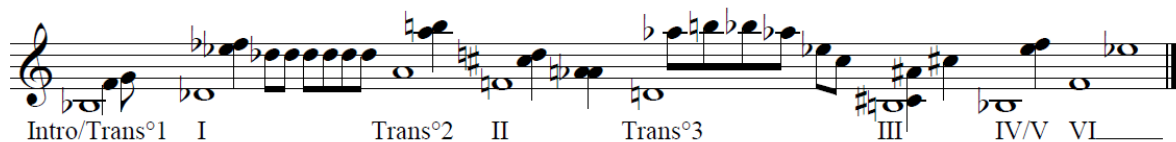


Figure 1: Central pitches and constitutive intervals in *Kyema* from *Trilogie de la mort*

5. *Songs of Milarepa* (1984): a mixed piece for voice and electroacoustic

The narrative structure of *Songs of Milarepa* is close to a music theater conception. In addition to the reciting of the Tibetan text, Radigue has built a musical background out of her sound material. That sound material constitutes the foundation of the composition and is a bourdon bass with different overtone structures emerging of that same material. These structures very close to the Mongolian overtone singing refer to the Asian singing tradition. These structures, if inspired by the Mongolian overtone singing, are really slowed down and transformed by Radigue’s conception. The composer incorporates text into music that is really close to its origins realizing a style fusion with the original music coming along with

⁵ Translated by Viviane Waschbüch. “C’est du tibétain de cuisine, *Me* c’est le feu et *Kou*, le corps sacré. Cela n’existe pas en tibétain.”

that type of text. The overtone fluctuations in the electronic part are used as a counterpoint to the voice. The musical development knows two different phases:

1. Dense action and many fluctuations in the electronic part when the original text is declaimed (beginning and middle part).
2. Little action and less fluctuation in the electronic part when the translated text is read (response to beginning and end).

The bourdon bass is ever-present as a fluctuating octave with microtonal movements. The introduction, transition (1), translation I, and transition (2) are all built on the same tonal material.



Figure 2: Bourdon bass with fluctuations in microtones in *Songs of Milarepa (Elimination of desires)*

The different overtone melodies are all built on the same material of pitches and intervals, shown here in the second example:



Figure 3: Pitches of overtone melodies in *Songs of Milarepa (Elimination of desires)*

The Coda is composed of the same fluctuating octave but with an F-sharp in between the octave creating a special tension with an augmented fifth:

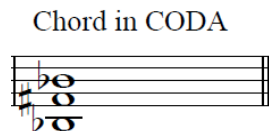


Figure 4: Chord of the Coda in *Songs of Milarepa (Elimination of desires)*

After analyzing the harmonic structure I'm analyzing the general form *Elimination of desires* from *Songs of Milarepa* in a colon with different categories that seems important for the piece such as: time, structure, sound elements, musical evolution and the musical result out of the mixed material between the voice and the electronic material.

TIME	PART	SOUND ELEMENT	MUSICAL EVOLUTION	RESULT IN MIXED MATERIAL
0'00 – 0'45	Introduction of the story in Tibetan	Soft Bourdon bass on B \flat Melody of the text spoken	Sound is becoming more overtones (becoming clearer) and moving from accompaniment to main voice	The voice is really clear but the electronic modulated sound is gaining importance
0'46 – 0'48	Transition	Soft Bourdon bass on B \flat	Bourdon is now main voice	Bourdon is now main voice
0'49 – 1'58	Translation I (in English)	Voice and strong Bourdon bass on B \flat Little fragmented overtone melody is appearing	Bourdon is really strong 01'09 First Melody 01'36 Second Melody	Bourdon is much stronger in the translation than in the original Tibetan part
1'59 – 02'03	Transition	Strong Bourdon bass; fragmented overtone melody	Regular transition	Bourdon and overtone melody are now main voice
02'04 – 07'53	Song	The Bourdon B \flat (soft); the melody (loud and predominant)	The overtone melody is as strong as the prerecorded singing	The overtone melody realizes a polyphonic structure to the lama's singing
07'54 – 17'04	Translation II (in English)	Strong Bourdon B \flat bass; fragmented overtone melody; text is read	The overtone melody is an accompaniment to the text	Text is main voice, accompanied by overtone melody and Bourdon bass
17'05 – 17'21	Coda	Bourdon B \flat and overtone melody	Bourdon and overtone melody in decrescendo	Music as a conclusion: elimination of desires

Table 2: Time structure, formal organization and musical evolution in *Songs of Milarepa (Elimination of desires)*

The piece can be thought in different organizational structures: or as a A – B – CODA piece, or more sophisticated and that is what I will propose as a two-part piece with many diverse sub-sections:

PART 1: (0'00 – 2'03) Introduction – Transition – Translation I – Transition

PART 2: (2'04 – 17'21) Song – Translation 2 – Coda

Part 1 can be seen as an introduction and part 2 as the major part of the piece. The first part is only an introduction to the long song that is following. Important in this specific piece is that in comparison with the other pieces the sound comes without any textual context. The electroacoustic sound elements are only used to sustain the meaning of the text. Besides, the text recited and chanted by the Buddhist monk are a musical element in itself that founded the musical structure of the whole piece. The form is a result of the declamation and the music is adapted to this structure given by the two speakers.

6. *Jetsun Mila* (1986)

Jetsun Mila is a piece consisting of different musical elements. It is much more abstract than the composer's other two pieces. Moreover, the structural parts of *Jetsun Mila* are much longer from the musical phrases and the sound element-evolution than in the other Buddhism-

inspired pieces. This piece from 1986 is already closer to Radigue’s instrumental chamber music. The central pitches of the piece are the four following intervals:

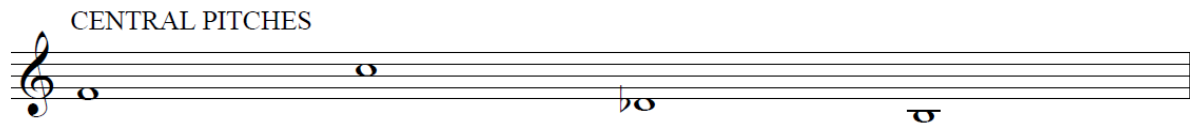


Figure 5: Central pitches in *Jetsun Mila* (1st part)

To these main pitches are added some other intervals in every section of the piece. This notation does not include the microtonal fluctuation that is always part of the musical language of Eliane Radigue.



Figure 6: Central pitches with main added intervals in *Jetsun Mila* (1st part)

The following table gives a short overview of the structural organization of the 1st part of *Jetsun Mila*.

TIME	PART	SOUND ELEMENT	MUSICAL EVOLUTION
0’00 – 03’40	INTRODUCTION	Fluctuating sound with beat frequency	Sound is slowly modulated; pitches and their harmonics are added
03’41 – 12’20	I	Bourdon bass is accompanied by a strong isolated pitch	Isolated pitch becomes rhythm (heartbeat) and a strong beat to the bourdon bass
12’21 – 20’22	II	Bourdon bass persists but is replaced by white noise colors	Musical evolution is fast; very active pulsation
20’23 – 34’18	III	Bourdon bass with overtones that give “didgeridoo” sound	The musical evolution is getting slower; harmonic fluctuations are stronger
34’19 – 37’25	IV	New sixteenth-note rhythm movements are interacting in low register.	The sound color is close to low strings (cello and bass). The gong is giving punctual signals that are getting more intense.
37’ 26 – end	CODA	Fluctuation is fading out.	Sound is fading out slowly. The gong rhythm is persisting.

Table 3: Time structure, formal organization and musical evolution in *Jetsun Mila* (1st part)

Conclusion

From the point of view of the sound creation *Jetsun Mila* and *Trilogie de la mort* are working with the same sound elements as for example: white noise, bourdon basses and small overtone constructions that fit in the original sound-color of the piece. The evolutions of the two pieces are slow, making the sound modulation almost imperceptible: it is what makes Radigue’s music interesting, rich sounded and colorful. The attachment to the modulation is a relict of the classical training of the composer. She has always been interested in the modulations of classical music and transported that element to her electroacoustic creations: “I’ve always

been fascinated by transitions - when you leave a tonality for another. You travel in between and you never know where you are going.”⁶ (Girard, 2013: 97).

Compared to *Jetsun Mila* and *Trilogie de la mort*, *Songs of Milarepa* is a different type of piece. It's a narrative piece and the sound modulations are much faster than in the two other pieces as they follow the declamation of the text. Besides, Radigue is working with sound modulations close to overtone singing. In this piece the composer is on the way to her new stylistic that will appear in her instrumental pieces.

All the three pieces are close to the Buddhist philosophy and conceptions in the musical elements:

- The modulating sounds can be related to the evolution of the soul in the Buddhist tradition;
- The meditative sounds are related to the mediation in the Buddhist tradition;
- The concept of emptiness is realized in *Jetsun Mila* and *Trilogie de la mort* by the slow evolution of the musical elements;
- In *Songs of Milarepa* the Buddhist concepts are less transported by the music but simply by the meaning of the philosophy in the spoken text.

We can conclude that *Jetsun Mila* and *Trilogie de la mort* are a direct musical realization of the Buddhist conception. In *Songs of Milarepa* the Buddhist conception is less realized in the music as it accompanies the text, but by the meaning of the text that is deeply related to Buddhism. Radigue's conception on realizing Buddhism in music is totally different to other contemporary composers: often the Buddhist conception is realized by silence or many long pauses. Radigue realizes the concept in an opposite way by an uninterrupted soft sound stream that is carefully modulated and is in this way probably closer to the original concept of Buddhism.

References

Girard, Bernhard. *Entretiens avec Eliane Radigue*. Château-Gontier : Editions Aedam Musicae, 2013.

Waschbüsch, Viviane and Eliane Radigue. *Discussion 6/05/15*. Paris, 2015.

⁶ Translated by Viviane Waschbüsch. “J’ai toujours été fascinée par les transitions, par ces quelques mesures, parfois plus, ou l’on quitte une tonalité avant de retomber dans une autre. On voyage, on est entre deux eaux, on ne sait jamais tout à fait où l’on va.”