

Dialogues from the film "Presque Rien avec Luc Ferrari".

Luc: The easiest thing to say is that I am a composer. I write music, but I also make noises with electronic sounds and anything I can find around me. I'm also interested in everyday sounds. I move between the abstract and the concrete.

Elise: shore - hide - belt - crush - change - crumple - like - complicity - contain - flow - pour - backdrop - cover - curiosity - tumble. I enjoyed creating a flash flood that goes up all the time.

Luc: Well, this story is the story of an encounter that is probably sentimental, a love story. "Cahier du Soir" is an evening between a man and a woman, between two lovers, whether they are man/man, woman/woman or man/woman. Each piece represents a stage of this dinner, of conversations, don't be shy.

Elise: Don't you have all the titles at the end?

Luc: Yes, we do at the end. We're not sure if it's a clarinet playing it, so the musicians choose their parts with the title in mind, which is "Don't be shy". This means that at the beginning we assume that all the musicians are shy. So they will play with a certain shyness.

Elise: Do they end up daring or not?

Luc: A bit more towards the end, they're more used to it. Your role is to explain, so you're going to say that, without wanting to boss you around!

Elise: You're exaggerating!

Luc: No, I'm not.

Elise: It's true that in the first moments we spend together we're a bit shy, a sort of stage fright. On the score, I read the following indications about the piece, which is called "Don't be shy", and then I look at the camera or the audience.

The conductor: In this first part, this long note, the idea is to vibrate but not to divide the amplitude. That comes later. To have something that is... for example.

Luc: That's not thrifty enough, it's too rich, and above all, everyone has to keep going, otherwise... There are loads who don't play, the viola, the bass clarinet in agreement and all the violins and all the woodwinds... There are two times that...

The conductor: It's very pretty when there's ...

Luc: And this is the same, these are the ones that continue, the woodwinds.

The conductor: It's difficult to come up with a mezzo-forte, we're so used to going to nothing.

Luc: It shouldn't end with an attack, it ended with a piano attack, it should be left open.

Elise: There's nothing left marked, apart from indications to the musicians. The skins of the two perc. - I assume that means percussion instruments - are covered with red felt. Or again, obsessive continuation of the percussion and 5 times 7 bars before the entrance of the P, I suppose that means piano. And further on, obsessive continuation of perc and p during etc....

Voice-over: I was a kid during the Second World War and my parents listened to Radio London. Those are fantastic sound memories, those voices scrambled by electronic devices through which we listened to totally surreal messages! One day, I heard some incredible noise music: it was Arthur Honegger's "Pacific 231" and it had a profound effect on me.

I first studied piano at the Conservatoire de Versailles and then, in 1953, I went to Olivier Messiaen's class. In 1954, I went to Darmstadt, and it was wonderful: my first serial works were played there straight away, and there I met the whole generation of musicians who made up the post-war musical life: Luciano Berio, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mauricio Kagel, Earl Brown... But the encounter that taught me the most, both philosophically and aesthetically, was John Cage.

Serial music was a big part of my life at the time. But very quickly, from the early 60s onwards, it seemed dogmatic. So I undertook harmonic research that contradicted serialism and I became a deviant. I can't stay in a dogmatic creative system, I can only get out of it!

In the 50s, there was what was then called the avant-garde, and it revolved around three axes: serial music, in which I was initially involved, electronic music, which was emerging in Cologne, and in Paris, musique concrète, which I chose to explore because it seemed more barbaric to me!

Elise: I was brought up by women, and later I was always surrounded by women. It was by living this secret understanding that I understood what it was to be underground... So I stayed in hiding, and there, in total insecurity, I thought, I worked, I loved, I hated, I accepted a little, I refused a lot, I spoke, I kept quiet, in short, I lived, I shouldn't have,

I made films, I shouldn't have,

I wrote texts I shouldn't have,

I even said what I thought, I shouldn't have.

It has to be said that I took pleasure in it, I shouldn't have.

Luc: I had read a summary article on 20th century contemporary music, which must have been from the 1950s, which said: there are only two people

about whom we can say very little: Edgar Varèse and John Cage. So I said to myself: I've got to find these guys.

So I bought a place on a cargo ship that took me to New York in winter. In the meantime I had corresponded with Varèse and he received me. I stayed eight days in New York, I saw him every day, we went for walks, he showed me his neighbourhood, which was an Italian neighbourhood, everyone called him Maestro. We drank, we ate, we talked a lot about music, I showed him my scores.

And the boat was fantastic, as it was winter, there were always rustling storms, without waves, but with little whirlpools that flew into the air like weeds in a wild field. As there was a lot of time on this trip, I even wrote some piano pieces called 'La Suite Hétéroclite'.

Voice-over: In 1953, Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry asked me to join them in the Groupe de Recherches Musicales. I wanted to finish some of my instrumental pieces first, so I didn't join until 1958. Immediately fascinated by these new methods, I immediately composed "Etudes aux accidents" and "Etudes aux sons tendus", which were performed that year at the opening of the Brussels World Fair.

Do you observe nature?

In 1963, with my piece "Hétérozygote", I slipped away from the dogma of musique concrète, which consisted of composing music from sounds invented in studios. The arrival of the portable tape recorder enabled me to go out and pick up the sounds of the street, the sounds of life.

For me, recording is the first creative act. Capturing sounds outside the home means bringing society, intimacy and sensuality into my compositions... I pick up noises from the city, the words of people passing by, the sounds of the house... I'm an ear that wanders, that selects, and that catches sounds on the fly, like taking a photo. Once I'm back in my studio, I work more like a painter: I treat these sounds like found objects and I introduce them into a musical form.

Luc: I pay a lot of attention to sounds because I have a sense of beauty! In other words, I have a sense of the aesthetics of sound that makes me say: this gives me pleasure and pleasure is not trivial, it's not superficial, it's a very strong thing that gives you permission to send it! At that moment I know that it corresponds to my sensibility, that it can correspond to other sensibilities, because I'm not unique in my genre and I can send it!

Luc: It's the machine that interests me.

Luc: Ah, yes, that's funny. This is the train as it goes by, quite a bit transformed. I did the Montreuil market afterwards. That allowed me to mix the voices of the robots at the Foire du Trône with the voice of the fishmonger at the market. In the end, the sounds that come from life, that meet others and

that clash just as ideas meet in the head, all at once, we have a cataclysm of images that go by at full speed... For me, music is a little bit like that...

Elise: For my installation 'Cycle des Souvenirs', I worked with trivial sound and visual memories that had been inscribed in my memory and that represented moments in my life. The musical score, made up of pieces of reality and silences, is burnt onto six CDs that are superimposed in time in a haphazard way.

Voice-over: I went to collect sounds and images at the Arènes de Lutèce where I used to play as a child, Place de la Contrescarpe where I used to wait for the bus, Quai Saint-Michel where I used to buy music paper, Gare de l'Est where I used to take the train for my concerts or studio creations in Germany, Ventimiglia where I used to spend holidays balancing on the border, and of course my home and studio...

Elise: I was born, I think in Royan, on 12 February 1907.

When I was born in Montauban in 1898, the weather was stormy.

I was not born on 5 February 1924.

When I was born in La Ciotat, on 22 August 1900, my grandfather was still playing the cornet in a customs barracks.

If I was born on 28 June 1937, it's because I took a photograph on that day, but I don't know if there's such a thing as "Almost Nothing", so how should I know?

Voice-over: For my play "Presque Rien, ou Le lever du jour au bord de la mer" (Almost Nothing, or Daybreak by the Sea), I was in a village in Dalmatia in 1967, still with my tape recorder and microphone, and our room overlooked a small fishing port set in the hills, which gave it an extraordinary acoustic quality. Just before dawn, the silence began to fill with the sounds of life as it resumed its cycles: the same fisherman, the same bicycle, the same donkey... So I left the microphone on the windowsill and every night, from 4 to 6, I recorded. Later, in my studio, I composed by intervening on this reality in the most hidden way possible and I said: this is soundscape!

Elise: The ashtray, if diverted from its initial function, can become a receptacle for fragments of paper on which I have inscribed notes, chords, silences and rhythms. For my piece 'Jeu du Hasard et de la Détermination', I said: the ashtray will be my software and I'll draw the papers at random to build the tape and the instrumental score.

Then, with a hell of a lot of determination, I decided that the piece would be 21 minutes long, that there would be sounds ranging from 2 seconds to 45 seconds and, all things considered after multiple simulations, that I would need 371 elements. So I let myself be guided by the ashtray, without cheating. At least, not too much...

Voice-over: I like to play with sound images in the same way as you play with words in poetry. Sounds say as much as words, and I've called this

articulation of the language of noises "anecdotal music", because I wanted to reclaim the anecdote in a musical world dominated by abstraction.

Luc: The score develops on its own, every day it suggests what I'm going to do next, except that it lasts for months, generally there are a lot of notes, and so I go towards the end living the adventure of this score and living my life myself. In other words, it continues the idea of autobiography, even if a score is completely abstract, it has the character of me at the start and me at the end, in what state am I?

Voice-over: Because in a garden, there were flowers that were like a big dream. And I was very small. That day, I was chewing on a grain of rice that was in my mouth and I didn't care where it came from.

I watched the girl next door swinging from the branches of the trees in her yellow shorts. She was looking at me. I couldn't understand why she was swinging like that. Her hands were limp and seemed powerless to support the weight of her young body.

...I often thought of a girl. And what I liked most of all was her buttocks glistening in the grass. I don't know whether I was seeing them from a distance or in my imagination. It was a mixture of water, thick wood and mosquitoes in the heat...

There wasn't a breath of air and I was in a boat at night on a lake. The water was smooth and you couldn't see the surface, all you could see was the sky below, trapped in space. I could see a few clouds and I felt dizzy.

...Memories of heat, I sometimes have the impression that I've only lived in summer. On my bed, in the warm night of the bedroom, her skin was luminous. And in the midst of that whiteness, the hairs of her sex made an emptiness that joined the night...

I have a huge interest in confronting society, in all those things that upset us internally and change the way we see life. I went to do sound reports in Algeria, I went to Portugal after the Carnation Revolution, I went to Madrid... I'm always listening to the noise of politics.

Elise: I've been through all the musical movements, I've worked on Hörspiel radio creations, musical theatre, films... I've been through all that and I've come to consider that I could revisit my past experiences to put together colours that had nothing to do with each other. I've called it 'Exploiting Concepts'. This is true of my recent instrumental and electronic compositions, since the desire to work with these two forms of imagination has never left me. It's also true of the encounters I've had with young electro musicians or creators of sound sculptures, as different in their approach as ErikM or Christof Schlaeger.

Luc: I like this one.

Luc and Christof in German.

Luc: The difficulties are sometimes the sequences, which are too brutal, because these are brutal machines, so we had to interweave ideas, so I asked him to improvise on each instrument from his keyboard. You could hear everything straight away... Then we lay them on top of each other, and make a mix by hearing the other things he'd done before.

Luc and Christof in German.

Luc: For me, creation is time, even for an architect or a painter, it's a way of revealing time, and it's even clearer in music of course, because it develops over time. When I say that I make time, it's because I can lengthen or shorten it, it also comes from intuition, how you draw attention to something and how that time, which lasts a second, can be extended to five minutes. So making time is making a time that is not real time.

Erik: That's low.

Luc: It's low?

Erik: It's just little sounds.

Luc: There aren't any really loud sounds, there's just one.

Erik: I'm putting it all in the machine tonight, I'm cleaning it, it's just to be able to work I'm keeping it.

Luc: Low pulse, that's the sound at the end, there's a sort of great rhythmic crescendo and on the last low sequence, I bring back little rhythms.

Erik: We already had that.

Luc: Yes, we did that.

Luc: Wait, we can stop now... I was very discreet on the Beethoven!

Erik: We didn't recognise it!

Luc: In fact, maybe it would be better to have the voices in the next one, which I gave you...

Erik: Because I tried there.

Luc: On the little noises.

Erik: On 4 okay, so wait, I'll make my notes...

EDELICA – DVD "Presque Rien avec Luc Ferrari A film by Jacqueline Caux and Olivier Pascal

Luc Ferrari went through all the centres of revolt, all the musical ideologies of the second half of the century, achieving the feat of not allowing himself to be subjugated by any of them and never ceasing to develop, in a multiplicity of ways, a perfectly personal aesthetic whose profound coherence is even clearer to us today.

After studying with Alfred Cortot, Arthur Honegger and Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire and taking part in the adventure of serialism, it was with passion that, from 1958 onwards, alongside Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, he became involved in the exploration of 'musique concrète' conducted by the Groupe de Recherches Musicales. He quickly challenged the orthodoxy of concrete sounds in favour of concepts of his own invention such as "anecdotal music" and the "soundscape". Playing with telescopes and superimpositions of sound images borrowed from life, he shocked the world of contemporary music by bringing into it not only the everyday and the social but also - something that seemed perfectly incongruous at the time in the context of scholarly music – the intimate.

"Presque Rien" will be another of his concepts...

This film about Luc Ferrari - which includes a number of sequences shot at La Chaux de Fonds with the musicians of the Nouvel Ensemble Contemporain and at the site of his visual and sound installation "Le Cycle des Souvenirs" at the town's Musée des Beaux-Arts - attempts to give an account of the electronic, instrumental and orchestral career of this prolific creator with a thousand facets, not least of which is his tireless taste for meeting new people and opening up his music to other artists. We'll see him collaborating with the young 'electro' musician eriKm and the creator of sound sculptures Christof Schläger, among others.

This film also aims to show the eminently libertarian personality of this extraordinary composer: his spontaneity, his inclination towards hedonism and sensuality, his curiosity about everything, his rejection of all power and of any stable position vis-à-vis institutions, his pronounced taste for play, his sense of self-mockery and his fierce refusal of all dogmatism.

Jacqueline Caux

