TEMPO 72 (283) 34–44 © 2017 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0040298217000924

REFLECTIONS ON FORM: AN INTERVIEW WITH PASCAL DUSAPIN

O. Sidney Richardson

ABSTRACT: Composer Pascal Dusapin has crafted an intriguing and idiosyncratic musical style that is both expressive and rigorously formal. Born in 1955 in Nancy, France, he studied piano and organ in his youth and later Plastic Arts and Sciences, Arts, and Aesthetic at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, notably under composer Iannis Xenakis. From 1981 to 1983, he held a resident scholarship from the Villa Medici in Rome. Among the numerous accolades Dusapin has received are the Cino del Duca Prize in 2005 and the Dan David Prize in 2007. The Collège de France conferred upon him a professorship to hold the Chair of Artistic Creation from 2006 to 2007. He is a Commander of the French Order of Arts and Letters. His body of work includes extensive explorations of solo, chamber, orchestral, and operatic forces. What follows is an edited translation of an interview I made with Dusapin in his studio in Paris on 9 July 2016.

Would you speak a bit about your discovery of the works of Samuel Beckett?
You know, Beckett is such an old friend of mine. I actually discovered him when I was 15. Later I got even more into him while studying with [Iannis] Xenakis. He did not have much interest in contemporary literature, but something was totally bizarre between Beckett and Xenakis.

I'm sure.
So many years after, I'm very close to this, I took many titles. But that's not an answer, of course.

For me, Beckett is always associated with people, and a very human question. I knew that [*Waiting for*] *Godot* is a metaphysical fable, a postwar story with many human elements. But for me, I was intrigued early on by the formal, architectural spectre of Beckett. I began by getting to know the last works in fact. All of them were stark; all the texts of the 1970s were very close to formalism.

It wasn't easy for me to understand why he [Beckett] had done that, but I understood later. That greatly aided me in understanding what was behind the act of creation, because everything was minimalised. Towards the end of Beckett's last plays there is almost no longer any text. These are compositions: they are almost three-dimensional performances in fact. *Quad* was something I read very quickly and which fascinated me because I didn't understand it at all. And back

in the day … now for you it's easy with Youtube. You just search 'Beckett, *Quad*'.

Yes, that's how I saw it.
But even 20 years ago it was very difficult. So imagine me, when I was 20 years old, it was impossible. There was only the text. The text was like a score. There were only movements, like a fly, bees in a cage. I didn't understand it very well, but I liked it a lot. There are lots of texts like that in Beckett. It's true there was Deleuze, there was Xenakis, Varèse, tons of stuff like that. And with the years, like a watch, they clicked.

There you have it. It's not a question, but it's an environment. Today Beckett is very, very close. There he is [gestures to photo of Beckett hanging on the wall directly overlooking his desk].

What would you say is the legacy of Beckett?
Today Beckett is always close. He is a pure figure for me, an essential figure, a little severe. He's like an eagle, but he is a consciousness. For me, the legacy of Beckett is vigilance, of consciousness. He is always like a presence. And so he is that for me today. Afterwards, in the history of literature, that's something else. I think that a lot of writers today have problems with Beckett, with that minimalism. Those things are very hard, very strong, too … it's typical of the epoch. After all there were many relations in Europe among the people like Beckett and then with certain aspects of contemporary music.

Very rigid?
Very rigid. The era was like that. I found that in the plastic arts, in cinema, too. Literature is an area that's always very strong because it's so direct. We see immediately: there, where, the author, the artist.

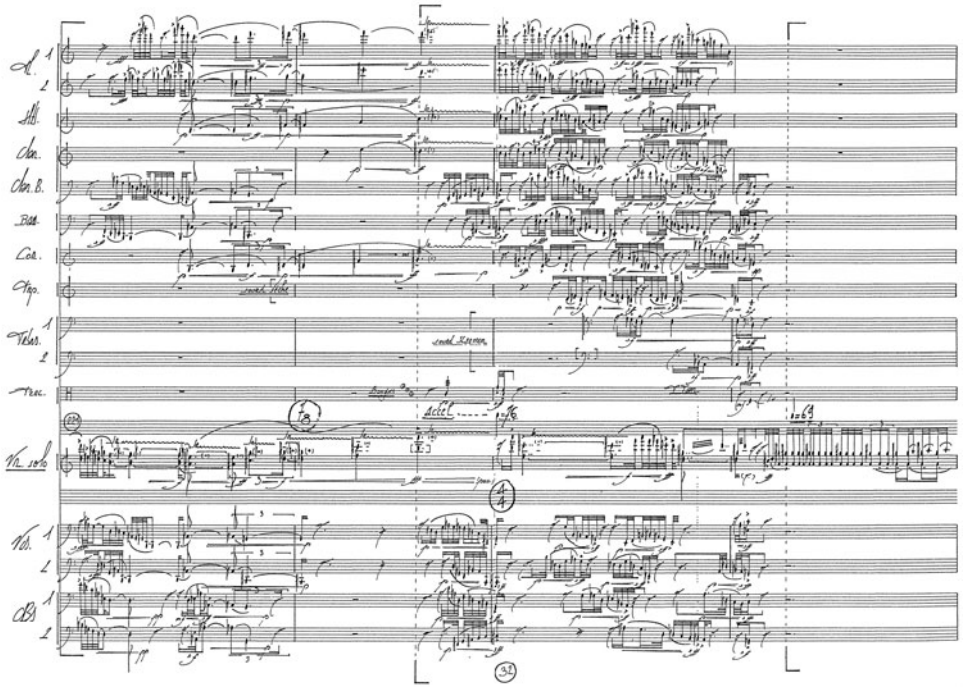
It's sufficient to read just a little to understand that Beckett is in fact someone who is absolutely essential to [modern] thought. He's like Nietzsche. He has something like that. Then, later, I was interested in the form of his books. There were many things that were like derivations, branches, manners of construction, ways of advancing the story that were similar to architecture in many ways. And myself, occasionally I would look at that and try to figure out how he constructed it. Then afterwards it goes in a little machine here [points towards his head], then up [twirls finger by ear] like that.

Quad ['*In memoriam Gilles Deleuze*'] (1996) is a good example of this (see Example 1). There aren't any connections between my music and Beckett. None.

Yes, it's rather an influence.
There you go. It was a reflection on the form [of Beckett's *Quad*]. It's true that there is a form in four parts, and that the number four is important. There is a fatigue created by that, an exhaustion, but my music has a lot to do with that. The same as in *Outscape* (2016): at the end it has an effect of exhaustion like that, an effect of imprisonment, of closing, whereby all possibilities are covered. It's like a caged animal. Consequently, at the time I linked that to the form.

But there are no illustrations [in the music]. Afterwards, it's true there are the lightning bolts. The shapes of the bolts, but these are false trails. It was a period in which I put in many highly conceptual illustrations of the music.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000924 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 1:
Pascal Dusapin, *Quad 'In memoriam Gilles Deleuze'*, bars 221–225. Music examples used with permission.

Yes, I also saw them in the prefaces of scores like Loop *(1995) and* Cascando *(1997).*
There you go, there are images, but always of processes. They are always images of forms.

Of little machines?
Yes, of little machines.

Rhizomes.
Or rhizomes, yes.

And lightning bolts are rhizomes.
Yes, of course. The lightning bolts come from a book by Georges Didi-Huberman, a very important French philosopher. He wrote a kind of book that's not on lightning bolts, but on something to do with light. I am fascinated by an image or an atmosphere, all of that. Consequently, I really loved all of these sorts of very different drawings. And they are environments . . . it's a form that comes like that, which inspires me. There you have it.

I have a question about tension and release in your music. At the end of Quad *there is a tonic/dominant effect, and it almost sounds tonal in a way. I was wondering is that intentional?*
I don't have a problem with that. If I have a tonal idea, I get it, but my music is not tonal.

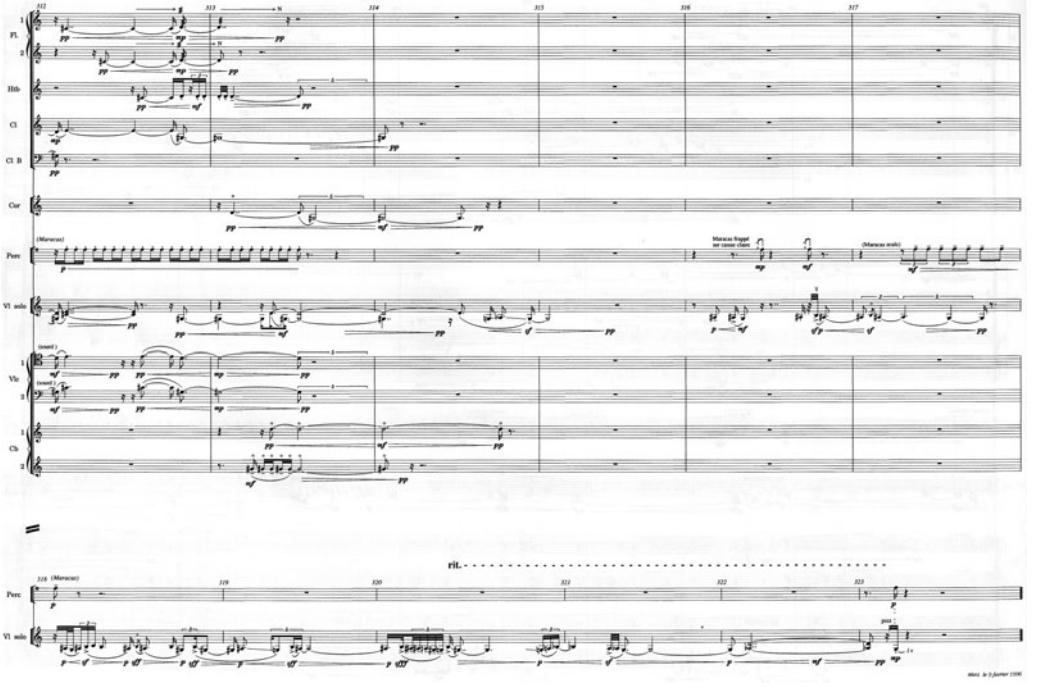
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000924 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I've noticed.
It's non-tonal, but in reality it's modal. For example, at the end of *Quad* it's a totally different story. You can't imagine that because, in a sense in *Quad*, I was awaiting the death of my mother.

Oh, I'm sorry.
No, it's not a sad story, don't worry about that. It was a long time ago, and I'm clear with that. When my mother was sick, I was in her apartment, not in Paris, in Metz. As I was finishing the score, I passed three months with her. I was working on the table everyday after I had been to the hospital. One day they told me, 'That's it'. I went back to the apartment, and I worked. I wrote the last page like this [sings closely-spaced melody], like that. And then there was [clicks tongue in imitation of maracas]. When I finished the score, it was four in the morning. I took a bath, and there I reflected. I said, 'but it's like a heart, that is, the unconscious'. Every time I hear *Quad*, I hear that death. That's the reality, each time.

I'm sorry, it's not sad for me. It was very sad, but that's how it goes. I make music while awaiting death like you, like everyone here in the world: we're all waiting to die.

Is singing a characteristic of your music from your operas onwards, from Niobé [ou le Rocher de Sipyle] *(1982) and* Roméo & Juliette *(1988)? Or maybe of all your works.*
Actually yes, all of the pieces. In the beginning, in fact, I was interested in different songs. I took an interest in . . . I didn't know what



Example 2:
Dusapin, *Quad 'In memoriam Gilles Deleuze'*, bars 312–23.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000924 Published online by Cambridge University Press

at the beginning. I was 20 years old. You're young … I was even younger than you. And you do things. You do, or you do not. I did things and I knew that I didn't have a problem with that. But even so, I was crazy about Xenakis, but Xenakis he spoke like this. He was vastly different from Boulez, Messiaen, all of that. I realized in the years afterwards that I wanted to construct something that sang. I had long since been made to understand that it was prohibited. It wasn't politically correct, musically correct.

For me it had none, and still today, it doesn't have any importance to me. Afterwards I didn't like it: I never like it when we define an art with interdictions. In those days … but all of that is finished, especially for you. But in those days it's as if we were doing a Rubik's cube but with only five sides, or three really. The player playing a game that doesn't work. It never worked. You have to compose with everything. I had a strong connection of parts through the question of intervals. I love intervals. I love song that's all, it's very natural.

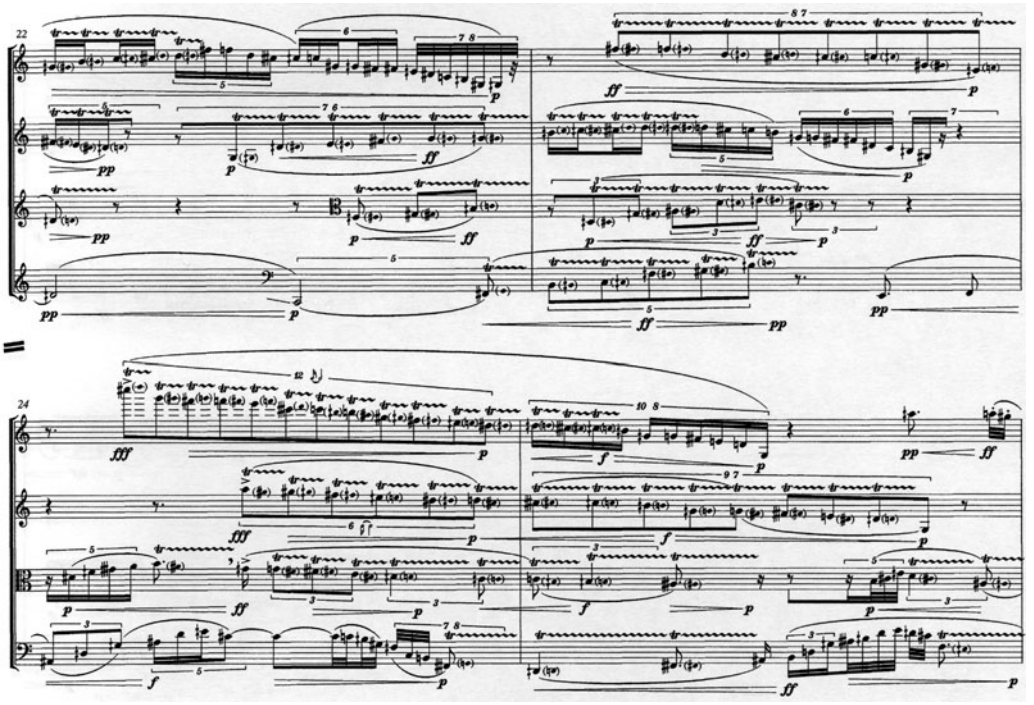
I'm very interested in Red Rock *(1987): the ambitus of a fifth, the four voices imprisoned in a very confined space.*
Ah yes, *Red Rock* is a little excerpt from *Roméo & Juliette*, so it was a lot of fun to work on. I made it after other things: the memory of the music of the Renaissance, all that, counterpoint, Middle Ages, medieval. All those things. I listen to all music, always and in abundance. Even here, when I work sometimes I put on Pérotin very softly. I put on Pérotin or Morton Feldman. I love Morton Feldman.

In the 1990s, was there a conscious stress on intervals? I know that in Go *(1992) and* Extenso *(1993–94), there are little groupings of intervals at play. Was that a natural development?*
Yes, it was a natural development, but also a very serious thought. Before, just before *Go*, there was *Medea* [*Medeamaterial*] (1991). The opera *Medea* was very different. There was also *Time Zones,* the string quartet [No. 2] (1989) (see Example 3). If you listen closely to *Time Zones*, which is a really long quartet, in fact it's almost 40 minutes long. At the beginning there are some very complex scales, I believe the scales from *Time Zones* have more than 140 steps. It's 142 or 148, I don't know anymore.

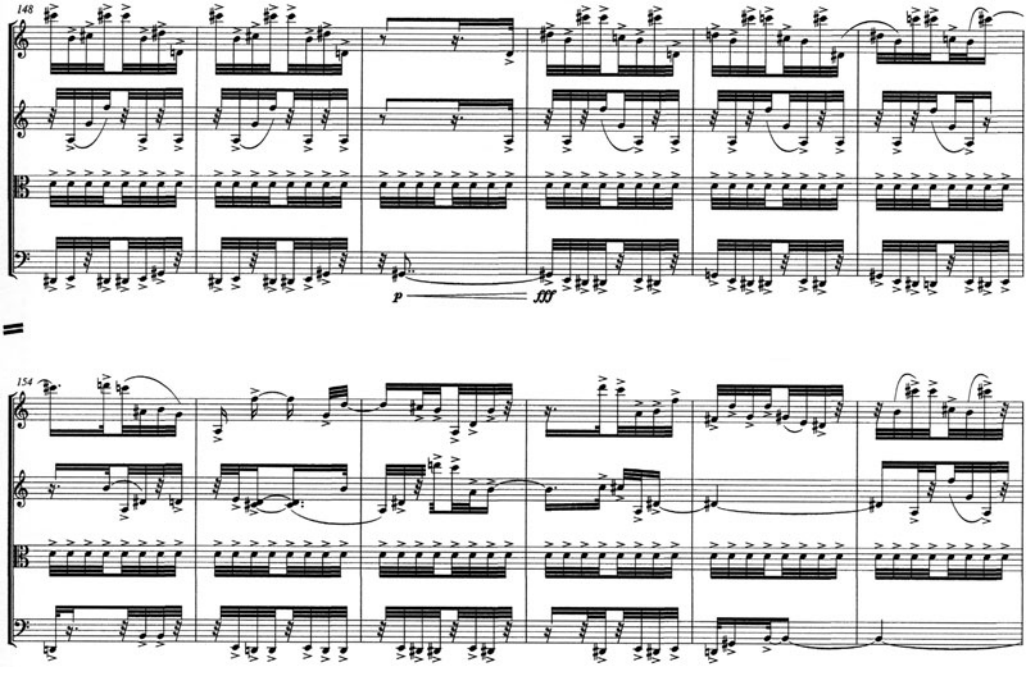
They are scales like this [interlocks his fingers together] with notes sometimes with groups. It's not always one note, it's an ensemble. So I fought, constructed a sort of little theory of personal usage, totally. It wasn't ideological. It wasn't serialism or spectralism, or a new theory, no no. It was for me. And it's for that reason that I never speak technically, but I work with very complex assemblages. If you listen closely to *Time Zones*, there is a moment where I change. That is to say, the scales instead of becoming more sophisticated, they simplify. I invent games to eliminate notes. That's why *Time Zones* ends with only five or six notes (see Example 4). That's why there's a fugato, because there's nothing left. So I left *Time Zones* and thought a lot. I wanted to find a different form. I was interested in long time periods.

I've often told this story: I received this written proposition for the orchestra of the Juilliard School under the direction of Rostropovich. It was incredible because Rostropovich he was funny, and the Juilliard Orchestra was fantastic, really fantastic. So they came to France. We had said a small piece, no longer than eight to ten minutes. They asked me how long it would take. So I said I thought of a project. I said, 'Okay, I want to do it', but I didn't say the genre. I wanted to make movement one. I think I constructed an idea on that form,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000924 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Example 3:
Dusapin, *Quatuor II 'Time Zones'*,
bars 22–25, Time Zone 4.



Example 4:
Dusapin, *Quatuor II 'Time Zones'*,
bars 148–159, Time Zone 24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000924 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not any immense symphony. Now you're familiar with the collection: it's an hour and a half, and I'm going to take the total. Each time I was commissioned for a small piece of ten, fifteen minutes, I did number two, number three. Then I made a plan, that is to say, I reduced, reduced. In fact I did everything backwards. I was like a chef, like a cook. There were tons of things like tables, ingredients, etc. Very quickly I threw out everything. I kept the salt, the pepper, water, olive oil, maybe some tomatoes. I created like that, and consequently I found myself with a sort of auto-invention that was a bit theoretical: *a little machine*, Beckettian machine. It's like in Beckett, for example in *Molloy*, there's . . .

Yes, with the stones?
With the stones! Yes, exactly. It's [makes sucking sound], and I wanted something like that because I also have a tendency towards hypertrophy. So I have to reduce, reduce. I invented a little theory, which became more sophisticated afterwards. It was like musical chairs with seven notes, but we can only hear five. It's like you have seven people but five chairs, when you do like that [claps hands together], there are always two out, or one. So I think that in *Go* there are six or seven. I don't know anymore off the cuff. Afterwards, I was interested in how to *replant*. That's Deleuze, it's the rhizome. How to take [makes cork-popping noise] a small goal. We know that: it's the system of variation.

Yes, in fact it's a territory.
Yes, a territory. It's a thing in classical music: we take a theme. Let's say I put some characteristics that I believe are really different because I had put them in several dimensions. Say I take, for example, a chord, maybe from *Go*. I'm not remembering so much right now because it was a while ago. Anyhow I made them like that, and afterwards I restored some very radical things. That's my very Beckettian side, very strict like that. I avoid well-rounded solutions in order to keep the substance, the smallest substance. We have done this often, saw with recent interest in a monographic concert, where we do *Go, Extenso, Apex* (1995), without intermission. As I listen to the chord from *Go* all of sudden it becomes like that [motions with his hand]. Then in *Apex* it does like that [twists hand up-side down]. So I heard it. Obviously for me this is normal, but it always amuses me. In fact it really works.

And it's a way of creasing, you understand? I always wanted to do things like that, like a piece of paper. You take a piece of paper, and then you do something there [draws a circle on a piece of paper with a pen], then afterwards you do like so . . . [holds the piece of paper up at various angles to my viewpoint], like this, like that; but, it's always the same thing! Except that you don't see the same things. The ear does in fact pick up that it's the same. There it's the same and there, too. Then at the end [crumples paper into a ball] etc. It was an effect of form, as it were. All of the cycles, the cycles of solos, were done like that. The idea changes: the original plan was not followed. Afterwards I changed things: I changed perspectives. As years passed, it became like a biography.

For example in *Exeo* (2002), which is maybe the hardest piece in the cycle, there is a moment where we lose the harmony. We lose the harmonic sentiment. It takes a really good orchestra to play that, very strong. When we lose the harmony, it's a string effect: vertical descents. There's a moment as the strings get more and more

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000924 Published online by Cambridge University Press

complex that the ear gets lost. Then up to the end it stabilizes. For me (I wrote that piece) it's the same as a biographical thing: it's my father that dies at that moment. It took me years to understand this. Years and years later, not immediately, but I realized that I actually had put that scene there. This sort of thing happens, except that it's in the music. I know that when we do that piece, if the conductor is friendly, and we have a very amicable connection, I'll explain that to him. He goes, 'Ah' [nods knowingly]. It's never the same afterwards: he understands better. I've noticed that several times.

That's why I say that the theoretical corpus, the little theoretical body, changes with life. It changes with time, which is again something Beckettian. It's waiting, of course, the famous *Waiting for Godot,* but there are many others. There's *Watt* and many other such personages, and again, an exhaustion with time, but one that creates an architecture. That's a paradox.

It strikes me that at the beginning of the Third Quartet there is almost a minimalism. Is that the same kind of thing as Beckett, Sol LeWitt, like that?
Of course, the Third Quartet, in 1993 I believe, and a little earlier with *Go*, *Extenso*, etc., there's *To Be Sung* (1992–93). There's effectively an environment where I'm between two worlds – a world that is very charged, and a world with … I have such an intense interest in American culture in general already. I also love all the postwar stories, minimalism, painting, Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Sol LeWitt. I reflected a lot on that. It was a paradox because when I went to university, it was a university of plastic arts. I was doing architecture, too.

It was [University of] Paris I?
Yes, Paris I. I went to Xenakis. Well Xenakis, he is the Greek god. At the same time I loved Barnett Newman.

Yes, it is really different.
But I think that something in me was formed very strongly by that. Those years, at the beginning of the 1990s, could be a story of *formal time* – the story being that I was between two worlds: an extremely expressive one and a very minimalist one. But I've never really given that up. My last opera, *Penthesilea* (2015), is an opera where there are some furious things, and then, from time to time, nothing more. But pieces in those years were filtered for the concert hall, so they had a different materiality. In the Third Quartet, for example, my head is still in *Time Zones*, but there are already some other things. That makes it a very difficult quartet to do, to understand.

But if I understand your question that minimalism exists, it's true. For example, there are no scales of 140 notes or things like that. There are really just a few things that combine in such an extreme way, which in turn creates a variety. It creates a blossoming.

There are a lot of micro-intervals, things like that, pieces of long movements that are like those of Schumann. It is like a very simple thing, but extremely difficult to do. There was a lot of change, but at the end of the Third, it is a thing a bit like *Quad*, too. There's so very little that turns. All is tight, so the music is made like that. There are no escape laws, but that always exists in my music.

I have a question about your photography. I noticed that almost all of your photos are in black and white.
Always, yes.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000924 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Is that an aesthetic decision? Or is this a parallel to your music?
Yes, photography was very discreet for me. Every day then and even now I make entire books; I have expositions. Black and white for me is a question of form. I think that's the relationship with music: it's form. Beyond that, there are a lot of colours in black and white.

Yes, the grays.
Grays, whites, blacks, it's immense really. I love photos in colour, but I never see anything in colour. Never. I don't know why.

Do you think about music in terms of colours, or just forms?
Many people have said, 'Your music is still very French because in the orchestra there are so many colours'.

It's a coincidence.
First of all, I don't like this debate on French music. Yes, it's [makes dust-in-the-wind gesture], but I know that when I think of music, for me it's the forms. Truly forms.

I know that when I went to Messiaen, he would do like this and play the piano [hunkers over an imaginary piano]: 'Ah, I hear blue, I see green'. I found that amusing, but it was normal; he was like that. I saw earlier images that were constructed in a fashion that wasn't geometric. It's also a kinaesthesia. It's like some shapes that go like this [makes Rubik's cube gesture], which are situated one in the other, and that becomes music. So photography is fabulous, because that was always like that. It's for that reason that I've always stayed with analogue. It's like that [gestures to the two scores on his desk]. What I'm writing is going to be played in more than a year. For one year it'll stay hidden. Sometimes with the rolls of film, it's the same thing. I take photos, and I see them a long time afterwards. I like that a lot.

I have a question about Aufgang *(2011) and* Quad. *I finally saw the score of Aufgang just two days ago. Is there any connection between the two? Or did you learn something doing Quad, which is smaller?*
I remember in the beginning of the 1990s I wanted to write a concertino. I really wanted it. When I received a commission, I answered yes, but for a concertino, and a bizarre concertino with an orchestra that's very low and divided.

Yes it's very low, the only high string instrument is the violin soloist.
I wanted something very mineral, where the woodwinds glide out. The sound is a little bit savage, but it works. I like that a lot.

Yes, really microtonal, and the tremolo.
I wanted something like that, but I didn't want to be confronted with the concerto. I didn't like the idea of it during that period. In fact, my first concerto really is *Aufgang*, and now *Outscape* too. For example, if you see *Quad*, *Watt* (1994), the trombone one, *Celo* (1996), for cello and orchestra. I didn't put on the score 'Concerto for trombone and orchestra'. Afterwards, the people around and my publisher insisted; so okay, it's a concerto, but that was not my idea. My idea was to create such a huge instrument, capable of such unity, in a way, and a collectivity, in another way, yet within the same body. I didn't want to create something, such a discord between one and the others. I don't know if I succeeded, but for me the questions around concerti were really boring. Later, when I wrote *Quad*, I knew for years and

years that one day I would write a real concerto for violin. I wanted to, but it takes time. One day, when I was ready, I charged a moment for that.

I construct my music always like that; I know what I want years beforehand. One day it will be impossible, because I will be dead or too old. I remember when I began *Aufgang*, I wanted to forget *Quad* totally.

For me, the music is like a mixed table. I have here a project with string quartet, here with orchestra, here with concerti, here piano, opera [arranging imaginary piles on his desk in a line]. Sometimes I push one, this one is a little bit like that [moves one forward toward me, another back towards himself]. You see what I mean. When I'm dead, it will be clearer for me.

I have a few questions about Deleuze. Did you know him personally?
Deleuze?

Yes, during his lifetime?
A little, because I took his classes at the University of Vincennes [Paris VIII]. That was a long time ago; I was 18, and it was extraordinary. I don't have any theoretical memories, but having just opened up after 1968, it was an absolutely incredible, experimental university. It was just a mess, unbelievable. The people were always speaking, crying, injuring everybody. It was totally different than today, this university was fantastic because there were so many huge artists and intellectuals. Imagine Jacques Lacan and Foucault came there, and Deleuze was a teacher. At that time we were really curious about everything. I remember Deleuze was such a rumour: who is Deleuze? I remember how it was: imagine a guy on a table – not on a table, in a little chair, smoking a lot. Around him were a hundred, maybe two hundred, people smoking, too. It was such a *machine à vapeur*! I remember that because I didn't smoke, so for me it was [makes choking sound]. I remember that it was so hard, but there was a fantastic fabric of thought. I remember Deleuze speaking, and I was shocked. Some years after I discovered *Rhizome*, the preface of *A Thousand Plateaus,* and my life changed totally, really changed. All my perspectives changed, but not in five minutes; I took years to understand that. If I can reconsider that period, I realise there was really before and after. For that reason Deleuze is so close to me, and not just for me (because you know many artists were impressed). It was really possible to get it, to get this thought, this mindset, but I remember how it was difficult to speak about that with musicians.

And Quad *is dedicated to Deleuze.*
Yes, of course. When I started it I knew that it was for Deleuze. It's strange because my mother was dying at that time, but I said, 'You have to stick with your first idea'. So I did that. It's *in memoriam* Deleuze. And it's a Messiaen homage as well; it's a tribute. I never talked with him [Deleuze], never met him like that.

Musicologists like Ivanka Stoïanova and Jacques Amblard have noted that your forms, especially your operas and your pieces that employ texts – that they employ forms of rhizomes. Is that accurate?
Yes, of course. For me the question of the rhizome is to create an object for the stroke of a genuine thought. When I was very young, I modified everything that I could imagine of musical thought, of developing, of the construction of the music. Imagine in the 1970s

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298217000924 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there were Boulez, the Structuralists, Stockhausen – moment form, an opera of 30 hours created with three notes, made with a unique formula to create an effect like that, hard and then arborescent, etc. Xenakis was like that, and all of a sudden I saw that he thought or even invented connections like that, recommencing things. It was extraordinary, and by extension I took that up in a very direct fashion, I created my own music like that. If you take all the early pieces, particularly *Musique Fugitive* (1980), the string trio, which is very much of that period, it's truly almost a theorization of the rhizome.

Afterwards, after the investigation of themes, particularly in the operas ... *Roméo* is a gigantic bag of rhizomes really. It's a folly, but it's already the end of a period. That is to say, with Olivier Cadiot we amused ourselves enormously, but in fact we finished something of the post-structuralist story all the same, at any rate, in relation to literature, particularly polysemy.

Today for me the question of the rhizome is very present, but I've overrun it with loads of other things. I'm not saying that I've moved on from that idea, but I construct things in a very different fashion with a development to be heard in what I believe to be a particular way. Take *Outscape*, which you heard in Chicago.

In *Outscape* we have the impression that it starts and then it goes like that [makes expanding sound and gesture], but in fact, the form is perfect. The beginning is the last thing I wrote. That is to say, it's the form itself of the piece that will invent its origin. It's very different. It's often very like that in my music, and there exists an interior of the music. Sometimes I do that ... then afterwards I do that. That's to say that each time the origin finds itself. For example the thematic aspect of *Outscape* is not the beginning, but hidden. Since it's hidden elsewhere, it's not an arborescent thought. So now I amuse myself, I work. I amuse myself by thinking of forms on two extremely different stages, at any rate, a rhizomatic state.

In fact the rhizome is simple to understand. It's like this: we say, 'It's how do we change our mind? It's how do we abide by the road we take?' You say, 'Ah, I'm going to go over there'. 'Ah yes? Me, too, I'll do like that; I want to go over there'. But to go over there I do [makes huge detour about the table while walking his hand with two fingers]. I don't go straight, I do tons of things like that that are very different; I come back to the front, etc. Thus, if you will, the form itself, the constitution of the form, is created by modules.

If you take for example the second movement of *Aufgang*, it's very melodic with a large solo, very melancholic, etc., it's the same. It's not created by continuity in fact. At that moment I indicate that this natural sound departs. It's as if you made a gesture like that; but, before doing that gesture, you must do a lot of things: you must develop the muscles, you must not drink excessive amounts of wine all night long, you mustn't tremble, you must ... you see? This movement is entirely made between the front and the back; it's composed in two senses.