

## Henri Dutilleux

### “Le Temps l’Horloge,” for soprano and orchestra

HENRI PAUL JULIEN DUTILLEUX WAS BORN ON JANUARY 22, 1916, IN ANGERS BUT GREW UP IN THE NORTHERN FRENCH FLANDERS TOWN OF DOUAI, WHERE HIS FAMILY RETURNED AT THE END OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR. DUTILLEUX AND THE PIANIST GENEVIÈVE JOY (THEY MARRIED IN 1946) HAVE LIVED ON THE ÎLE SAINT-LOUIS IN PARIS SINCE 1961. “LE TEMPS L’HORLOGE” WAS JOINTLY COMMISSIONED BY THE SAITO KINEN FESTIVAL MATSUMOTO (SEIJI OZAWA, DIRECTOR), THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA (JAMES LEVINE, MUSIC DIRECTOR), AND THE ORCHESTRE NATIONAL DE FRANCE (KURT MASUR, MUSIC DIRECTOR). THE BOSTON SYMPHONY COMMISSION (AS ONE OF ITS 125TH ANNIVERSARY COMMISSIONS) WAS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF CATHERINE AND PAUL BUTTENWIESER. DUTILLEUX COMPOSED THE THREE SONGS IN THIS CYCLE BETWEEN 2006 AND 2007, WRITING THEM SPECIFICALLY FOR SOPRANO RENÉE FLEMING. HE PLANS TO ROUND OUT THE CYCLE WITH A FOURTH SONG (TO A WELL-KNOWN TEXT OF BAUDELAIRE). SEIJI OZAWA LED FLEMING AND THE SAITO KINEN ORCHESTRA IN THE WORLD PREMIERE ON SEPTEMBER 6, 2007, AT THE SAITO KINEN FESTIVAL IN MATSUMOTO, JAPAN. THE PRESENT BSO PERFORMANCES ARE THE AMERICAN PREMIERE; THE WORK WILL BE REPEATED BY THE BSO AT CARNEGIE HALL IN NEW YORK THIS MONDAY NIGHT.

“LE TEMPS L’HORLOGE” IS SCORED FOR PICCOLO, TWO FLUTES, TWO OBOES, TWO CLARINETS, BASS CLARINET, TWO BASSOONS, CONTRABASSOON, THREE HORNS, THREE TRUMPETS, THREE TROMBONES, TUBA, TIMBALES, TWO PERCUSSIONISTS (PLAYING CROTALES, ACUTE AND MEDIUM SUSPENDED CYMBALS, TWO TAM-TAMS, WOOD BLOCK, AND BASS DRUM), VIBRAPHONE, MARIMBAPHONE, HARP, CELESTA, HARPSICHORD, ACCORDION, AND STRINGS.

Henri Dutilleux is an obsessive perfectionist. His meticulous attention to each detail in his scores endows them with a jewel-like gleam, reflecting his affinity for the Flemish artists of the Northern Renaissance. His self-critical attitude is unwavering—and a key to Dutilleux’s artistic personality. The composer has reputedly rejected a large amount of material in the process of molding the relatively small list of works published throughout a lengthy career (he began composing at thirteen). In the new century, for example, he has published only three works, including the new song cycle on the present program. Yet the ninety-one-year-old composer remains an active artist.

Dutilleux was born roughly in the middle of the generation separating Messiaen and Boulez and, like both, turned away from the superficial charm and artifice that had become identified with French music before the war. Yet he is something of a loner—a fact only emphasized by his longevity—and always stood apart from the sackcloth-and-ashes earnestness once associated with international postwar modernism. A chief appeal of Dutilleux’s music is its sensuousness of texture. His works evoke a colorful garden of sounds so delicately cultivated as to suggest a latter-day Ravel.

While Dutilleux’s father fought in the First World War, his family remained in temporary exile from its home in the northern French Flanders town of Douai. Dutilleux studied at the Paris Conservatoire and eventually won the Prix de Rome, but the outbreak of the Second World War intervened, and the young artist had to return abruptly from Italy to Paris. Dutilleux’s formative years were thus bracketed by the two world wars, whose horrors obviously came close to home. Could it be that the concentrated perfectionism of Dutilleux’s music involves an attempt to distill order and beauty from an otherwise chaotic world?

He patched together a career working as a chorus master at the Opéra and writing musical arrangements for nightclubs (one can detect an occasional influence of jazz elements). Later, Dutilleux got a job with Radio France writing incidental music for radio plays as head of a department labeled “musical illustrations.” But it was in the realm of “absolute” instrumental music that Dutilleux eventually found his authentic voice, beginning with his Piano Sonata (1948)—written for his pianist wife Geneviève Joy—and his Symphony No. 1 (1951). His reputation began to spread in the 1960s; curiously, this was largely a result of commissions from American (rather than French) orchestras. The Boston Symphony Orchestra in particular has played a vital role, commissioning such

pivotal works as the Symphony No. 2 (1955-59) and, more recently, in 1997, *The Shadows of Time*, Dutilleux's musical reflections on the tragedies of the Second World War.

Dutilleux is mostly identified with highly abstract, coloristic orchestral scores, but he frequently taps into the visual arts and literature to enrich his inspiration. A number of his major compositions involve deeply personal relationships with texts or paintings. When Dutilleux taught music at the École Normale in Paris, his classes often included visits to art galleries, and his most frequently performed work, the cello concerto "*Tout un monde lointain...*," is saturated with a love of Baudelaire. Although he belongs to no particular school, Dutilleux is clearly part of a significant lineage of French composers—among them might be numbered Berlioz, Debussy, and Messiaen—whose creative intuition has been enhanced by their enthusiasm for the other arts.

One unmistakably abiding concern for Dutilleux is a preoccupation with the interplay of memory and time passing (which has given the writing of Proust a special place in his artistic cosmos). Time and space, presence and absence, shadows and reflections—these form a network of imagery that recurs throughout Dutilleux's oeuvre, from purely instrumental works such as his string quartet (subtitled *Ainsi la Nuit*) to his settings of texts in the song cycle *Le Temps l'Horloge*.

After a long absence of the human voice from his scores, in the past decade Dutilleux began to write for it again when he introduced children's voices in *The Shadows of Time* (1997). The work preceding the present one is the song cycle *Correspondances* from 2003, written for Dawn Upshaw to texts drawn from the letters of Prithwindra Mukherjee, Rilke, Solzhenitsyn, and Van Gogh. Its title alludes to the famous poem of Baudelaire, whose artistic "shadow" recurs through Dutilleux's career. In fact, *Le Temps l'Horloge* has not yet reached its final version. Dutilleux intends to complete the cycle (currently made up of three songs by two 20th-century poets) by setting Baudelaire's prose-poem, "Enivrez-Vous" ("Get Drunk!"). Nor is the cycle meant as a swan song—the composer has expressed interest in returning to the string quartet genre.

*Le Temps l'Horloge*, written for soprano Renée Fleming, not only recapitulates poetic ideas that have long fascinated the composer; it also distills the essence of his musical personality in intriguingly potent concentrations (the first and third songs last only two minutes each). Dutilleux moreover seems to revel in the combination of the human voice in all its lyrical freedom and the pointillist textures of his orchestration. In her valuable study of the composer, Caroline Potter observes that Dutilleux has described himself as possessing "two opposing sides": a love for "freedom of expression" and an instinct for "precise, clear, and strict form."

The two poems by Jean Tardieu (1903-95) strike dramatically contrasting attitudes. Tardieu, like Dutilleux, worked at Radio France (and was indeed one of the chief architects of French radio). His poetry reflects a Mallarmé-inspired lyricism, while as a playwright, Tardieu was aligned with the postwar theater of the absurd of Ionesco, Beckett, and others. "Le Temps l'horloge" (from which the whole song cycle takes its title) plays off the irony of mechanically measured time versus the tricks and feints of psychological time—which more accurately reflects the human soul? Dutilleux responds with a gentle, melancholy humor: as if to counter the triple-meter flow (speeded up in the winds and harpsichord), the song nearly comes to a standstill in the middle as the clarinet erupts in a brief, meter-defying solo. The soprano's rising and falling lines meanwhile hint at time's recurrent patterns.

"Le Masque" (the longest of the three songs) presents us with quite another atmosphere: a chimerical confrontation between the narrator and a sphinx-like mask whose mystery is left unexplained. The vocal line's wide-ranging intervals seem palpably to trace the object. Here Dutilleux brings his mastery of coloristic textures—both elegant and dramatic—into supreme focus with music that alternately brightens and scurries into the shadows. Echoes of Bartók's nocturnal moods deepen the poem's sense of mysterious spaces, while muted brass bring in the briefest tinge of nightclub jazz. Notice how much Dutilleux can evoke with the harmonic brushstroke of one chord (describing the "green star")—or how a sudden crescendo spells unnamed fears. At the song's climax, even the voice resorts to a wordless melisma.

“Le Dernier Poème” of Robert Desnos (1900-45) is a deeply moving lyric of loss—and also the subject of ongoing controversy. Desnos was a surrealist poet who experimented with automatic writing and was hailed (though later condemned) by the surrealist guru André Breton. Desnos worked as an active member of the Resistance until the Gestapo arrested him in 1944 and deported him to a series of death camps. The poet survived the liberation of Terezín, but he died only a month after the war ended from illnesses he had incurred in the camps. He is the sole poet commemorated on the walls of the Monument to the Martyrs of the Deportation in Paris, where the text of “Le Dernier Poème” is inscribed.

The controversy pertains to the origins of the poem itself. For a while it was believed to have literally been Desnos’s final poem, written in the ultimate desperation of the camps; however, the text has since been shown to be a variant of a poem he had actually composed in 1926. Regardless, the heartrending eloquence of “Le Dernier Poème” is undeniable. It draws from Dutilleux a setting of profound sparseness. A sonority mixing timpani strokes and strings frames the song, creating an oddly unsettling ambience of hollowed-out nostalgia. A brief cluster of instruments gathers at the moment the narrator tries to embrace the absent lover. But Dutilleux’s music inexorably thins out, leaving tentative fragments of melody behind to comb through the shadows.

Thomas May

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“L’Temps l’Horloge”

Poems by Jean Tardieu and Robert Desnos

**Le temps l’horloge**

L’autre jour j’écoutais le temps  
Qui passait dans l’horloge.  
Chaînes, battants et rouages  
Il faisait plus de bruit que cent  
Au clocher du village  
et mon âme en était contente

J’aime mieux le temps s’il se montre  
Que s’il passe en nous sans bruit  
Comme un voleur dans la nuit

—Jean Tardieu  
« Plaisanteries »  
Editions Gallimard

**Time and the Clock**

The other day I was listening to time  
As it passed through the clock.  
Chains, clappers and cogs  
It made more noise than one hundred  
At the village bell  
And this pleased my soul.

I prefer time when it shows itself  
Rather than passing among us noiselessly  
Like a thief in the night.  
—trans. Benjamin Schwartz

**Le masque**

Un lourd objet de bronze creux  
En forme de masque aux yeux clos

S'élève lentement et seul  
Très haut dans le désert sonore.

Jusqu'à cet astre vert, à cette Face  
Qui se tait depuis dix mille ans,  
Sans effort je m'envole,  
sans crainte je m'approche.  
Je frappe de mon doigt replié  
Sur le front dur sur les paupières bombées,  
Le son m'épouvante et me comble :  
Loin dans la nuit limpide  
Mon âme éternelle retentit.

Rayonne, obscurité, sourire, solitude !  
Je n'irai pas violer le secret  
Je reste du côté du Visage  
Puisque je parle et lui ressemble.  
Cependant tout autour la splendeur c'est le vide,  
brillants cristaux nocturnes de l'été.

—Jean Tardieu  
« Histoires obscures »  
Editions Gallimard

### **The Mask**

A heavy object of hollow bronze  
In the shape of a mask with eyes closed  
Rises slowly and alone  
Very high in the sonorous desert.

Up to this green star, to this Visage  
Which has remained silent for ten thousand years  
I fly with no effort,  
I approach with no fear.  
I knock with my curled finger  
On the hard forehead on the convex eyelids,  
The sound terrifies and overwhelms me:  
Far away in the limpid night  
My eternal soul echoes.

Radiance, darkness, smile, solitude!  
I will not go violate the secret  
I remain next to the Face  
Since I speak and resemble it.  
Meanwhile all around the splendor is emptiness,  
brilliant nocturnal crystals of summer.  
—trans. Benjamin Schwartz

### **J'ai tant rêvé de toi**

J'ai rêvé tellement fort de toi,  
J'ai tellement marché, tellement parlé,  
Tellement aimé ton ombre,  
Qu'il ne me reste plus rien de toi,  
Il me reste d'être l'ombre parmi les ombres  
D'être cent fois plus ombre que l'ombre  
D'être l'ombre qui viendra et reviendra

dans ta vie ensoleillée.

**Robert Desnos**

Domaine public, 1953

**I've dreamt so much of you**

I've dreamt so strongly of you,

I've walked so much, talked so much,

So loved your shadow,

That I've nothing left of you,

I'm left to be the shadow among shadows

To be one hundred times more shadow than the shadow

To be the shadow that will appear and reappear

in your sun-filled life.

—trans. Benjamin Schwartz