

Bernard Cavanna (born in 1951)

Bernard Cavanna was very young when he decided to be a composer and he went on to embark on the career, mostly self-taught. Cavanna, who is an intuitive and clearly original creative artist, received encouragement from Henri Dutilleux who urged him at an early age (in 1968) to pursue his chosen path. Paul Méfano and Georges Aperghis then helped him produce his first concerts, but Cavanna was drawn to Eastern Europe and was greatly impressed by the music and ideas of the Romanian composer, Aurèle Stroë (1932-2008). Cavanna's repertoire has some thirty pieces covering most musical genres and featuring three concertos making distinctive use of one of the instruments of the ensemble which could be described as his musical fetish, the trio of violin, cello and accordion. There is his Violin Concerto (commissioned by Radio France for the violinist, Noëmi Schindler and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France), the Double Concerto for Violin and Cello (commissioned by the Orchestre National de Lille for Noëmi Schindler and the cellist, Emmanuelle Bertrand), and Karl Koop Konzert, sub-titled "comédie pompière, sociale et réaliste," written for accordion and orchestra and dedicated to the accordionist, Pascal Contet, plus family remembrances.

The composer invariably sees the concerto form as a conflict situation with the soloist struggling against massive, shattering or thundering orchestral forces. This predilection for conflict, confrontation and contrast is even more apparent in *Messe, un jour ordinaire* (1994), a seminal work that may be described as emblematic; it features the traditional prayers from the Ordinary of the Mass which are then disrupted and disturbed by the sensitive, tragic and mocking voice of Laurence, the young woman and extraordinarily moving character in the documentary film on drug addiction, *Galères de femmes*, by Jean-Michel Carré, which provided the inspiration for Cavanna's work. Laurence, a soprano, has been played by Isa Lagarde in many performances of this Mass which is not really a mass, a composition that takes the audience on mysterious wanderings from the Kyrie Eleison through to the Marie-Salope*.

Other striking works in Cavanna's repertoire are *Io* (1980/81), one of his early works showing the influence of Xenakis, composed for voice and eleven instruments; *La Confession impudique* (1987/1992), an opera based on *The Key*, a short story by Tanizaki, which has had a number of productions; the *Sept chants cruels* for soprano and orchestra, first performed in 2006 by Rayanne Dupuis (soprano) and the Ensemble Intercontemporain (conducted by Jonathan Nott); and *Gennevilliers Symphony* (commissioned by the Orchestre National des Pays de la Loire, which gave the premiere performance, conducted by Daniel Kawka, in 2006).

Cavanna's works are regularly programmed in France and internationally and often requested by contemporary music ensembles (Ensemble 2e2m, Ars Nova, Ensemble Intercontemporain, TM+, Ensemble Modern, and Nuova Consonanza) and by symphony orchestras.

Cavanna's compositional aesthetics are distinctively free of any dogma, showing genuine inventiveness based more on intuition than speculation, thereby producing a delightful eclecticism with the composer willing to accept the most unexpected combinations, ranging from popular style to the legacy of the romantics. This may be explained, at least partially, by his rejection of cliques and clans and by his openness to a wide range of sources extending to popular realms. It may also explain the influence of two references he sometimes cites, even if spoken in jest: Bernd Alois Zimmermann and Nino Rota. "Zimmermann (erudition as a disturbing collage) and Rota (a Latin Weill)." [Pascal Huyn]

What is important is the fruitful nature of these confrontations with their unusual vigour which, while sometimes adding brutality to the pleasure of detail and refinement, is matched only by a certain form of eloquent fervour - clear evidence that this unclassifiable composer and master of both timbre and composition never writes unless driven by an inner urge.

Bernard Cavanna has received a number of distinctions, including the grant for original creative work from the French Ministry of Culture (Bourse annuelle de la création, 1984), a residency at the Villa Médicis in Rome (1985/1986), the SACEM award for the best original contemporary work (*Messe un jour ordinaire*, 1998), the winning citation at the UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers (1999), a Victoire de la musique award (*Concerto pour violon*, 2000) and the SACD Grand Prix for music (2007), and the prestigious International Price Arthur Honegger (2013/Fondation de France).

He is currently contemplating the prospect of composing a piece to be called "à l'agité du bocal" on the text by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a composition for three tenors (opera, baroque and operetta style) and instrumental ensemble.

Virginie Palu

[* Translator's note: the term *marie-salope*, meaning a barge used to clear sludge, translates literally as the name "Mary" and an insult.

Shan Benson (translator)