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***Musique concrète* and dance: Pierre Henry's collaboration  
with Maurice Béjart**

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**Abstract**

From the beginning of his career as one of the main collaborators of Pierre Schaeffer, the French composer Pierre Henry (1927-2017) explored his *musique concrète* while maintaining a strong relationship with other art fields. Already in the 1950s, his music was played with pantomime, films, and sculptures.

Among Pierre Henry's collaborators in those days was Maurice Béjart (1927-2007) in particular, a French ballet choreographer who had just made his debut as dancer-choreographer. One of the first ballets they worked on together was *Symphonie pour un homme seul*, initially an early masterpiece of *musique concrète* composed by Schaeffer and Henry in 1950, which evolved into a distinctive work after it was re-conceived with Béjart's dance in 1955. After this successful adaptation, Henry continued his collaboration with Béjart. While Béjart choreographed a series of ballets on pre-existing musical pieces of Henry, the latter composed a piece especially for Béjart entitled *Haut voltage* (1956), one of his key works according to the composer. In his text "Mes seize années-clés" (My sixteen key years), Henry mentions this piece following their first collaboration on *Symphonie pour un homme seul*. It is the first work in which he looked for a fusion of acoustic and electronic sounds. From this key work to *La Reine verte* in 1963, most of Henry's works were composed for Béjart's choreographic performances.

What role did the art of dance play in Henry's creation, and to what extent did the choreographer influence the composer's work? This study analyzes these two artists' collaborations by examining the circumstances and the processes of their early three creations: *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1955), *Haut voltage* (1956), and *Le Voyage* (1962). It is also an analysis of the works of Pierre Henry in the years 1956-1963, a period which corresponds to his transition from the GRMC to his private studio.

**Introduction**

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1948, the French audience had the opportunity to listen to *musique concrète* for the first time. The Paris-Inter radio broadcasted Pierre Schaeffer's "Concert de bruits" (Concert of Noises) which consisted of five different *musique concrète* pieces. This new compositional approach – music composed and played exclusively on recordings (phonograph discs in this case) – would mark an important turn in the history of music as it introduced a pioneering aspect when performed: sounds came directly out of loudspeakers without any performer on stage. In this peculiar situation, how could one have held the attention of listeners in the concert hall? However, the absence of one of the essential

components of a musical event seemed to give certain advantages to this type of music. For instance, other visual elements could now occupy the place left empty by performing musicians.

Pierre Henry was born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 1927 in Paris. He studied percussion, piano, composition and harmony at the Paris National Music Conservatory. Pierre Schaeffer, who was then working at the French Radio and Television (RTF), hired Pierre Henry as a percussionist in 1949 for his musical research. Already at this point, Pierre Henry was one of the main collaborators of Pierre Schaeffer. He was also composing his own *musique concrète* pieces, but often maintained a strong relationship with other arts. From *Orphée 51 ou Toute la lyre* (1951); a lyrical pantomime written with Schaeffer, to his sound design for Nicolas Schöffer's "*Tour spatiodynamique de Saint-Cloud*" tower (1955), the first ever interactive multimedia creation, Pierre Henry's work in the 1950s contributed to the development of electroacoustic music as a kind of music that could enhance visual performances or art presentations.

Among the artists Pierre Henry worked with during those days was Maurice Béjart (1927-2007) in particular. Born in Marseille in the same year as the composer, Béjart had just made his debut as a dancer-choreographer in Paris. From their first collaboration on *Symphonie pour un homme seul*, Henry and Béjart worked together on more than fifteen ballets and theatrical performances. This paper follows three of their early collaborations to study what role Béjart's choreographies played in the musical creation of Henry. It also concerns the works of Pierre Henry in the years 1956-1963, a period which corresponds to his transition from the GRMC to his private studio.

### ***Symphonie pour un homme seul***

Pierre Henry met Maurice Béjart for the first time in 1954. They got to know each other through a friend of Béjart who told about his work to Schaeffer and Henry. After attending Béjart's ballet performance one day, Schaeffer and Henry invited him to their sound studio.

Béjart stated later that he had never heard about this type of music – *musique concrète* – before listening to it at Schaeffer's studio. Pierre Henry points out that he is the one who proposed to Béjart, during his first visit, to adapt *Symphonie pour un homme seul* for a ballet, while Schaeffer suggested to Béjart to conceive a performance on their composition *Orphée*.

The music piece *Symphonie pour un homme seul* is, as we know, one of the first masterpieces of *musique concrète* composed by Schaeffer and Henry. It was premiered on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 1950 at the Paris "*Ecole normale de musique*" conservatory. The composition is presented as a series of short movements. The original 1950 version contained 22 movements and lasted 1 hour and 20 minutes. It was later reduced to 12 movements for a duration of 22 minutes. This revisited version was created by Pierre Henry in June 1951 and four years later, Maurice Béjart choreographed on this shorter version.

The ballet *Symphonie pour un homme seul* presents two main characters ('The Man' and 'The Woman') and seven other dancers ('The Others'). There is no scenario in particular, but we

can see a desperate ‘Man’ try to escape his life with one of the long ropes hung from the ceiling.<sup>1</sup>

This ballet was opened on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1955 in Paris and was highly praised by the press. It is interesting to note that Béjart established in this choreography his style of body dynamics, his relationship with sound, and some of the themes he recurrently used afterwards. On the other hand, the music which had been re-conceived with Béjart’s choreography evolved from the status of an early masterpiece of *musique concrète* to the position of an important milestone in the work of Pierre Henry.

### ***Haut voltage***

After this successful adaptation, Pierre Henry and Maurice Béjart decided to continue their collaboration. While Béjart successively choreographed two ballets on Henry’s pre-existing musical pieces – *Concerto des ambiguïtés* (1950) and *Astrologie* (1953), each named by Béjart *Voyage au cœur d’un enfant* and *Arcane* –, Henry composed one piece entitled *Haut voltage* specifically for Béjart. The ballet was staged for the first time by the Janine Charrat Ballet Company in March 1956 at the Opera House of the city of Metz in France. It was also performed by Béjart’s ballet company, as both companies did many times, not only in France but also in foreign countries.

*Haut voltage* is Henry’s first music especially composed for Béjart. It follows a script written by Pierre Rhallys, a friend of Béjart who wrote several ballet scripts during this period. The story concerns a young man who is dominated by a woman who was a great supernatural power. She submits him to her magical performances in a public place while people around them admire these mysterious tricks. However, the woman finds out that the young man has a fiancée in the crowd. This magician becomes very angry and pushes the girl into the young man’s arms. The latter is so charged with very high electrical voltage by the woman that the fiancée is electrocuted by this contact. When the young man returns to his normal self, he finds his beloved one dead. In revenge, he takes the magic woman’s life.

In spite of the limits the story imposes, this composition became, according to Pierre Henry himself, one of the composer’s key works. In his text “Mes seize années-clés” (My sixteen key years), Pierre Henry mentions *Haut voltage* as the first work in which he looked for a fusion of acoustic and electronic sounds. He says:

Another ballet with Maurice Béjart, *Haut voltage*, is a musically very developed research on the experimental instrumental production and the microphone contact. The quintessence of composition between the electronics, the art of noise, and the instrument, that I will call electroacoustic music.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, *Haut voltage* was the beginning of Pierre Henry’s long exploration of his electroacoustic compositions.

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<sup>1</sup> See Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry (composers) Maurice Béjart (choreographer), *Symphonie pour un homme seul*, Louis Cuny (dir.), Paris, INA, <http://www.ina.fr/video/CPF86615753>, also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8dCdQ3iTrc> (last accessed 01/18). In this film published by INA (French National Audiovisual Institute), we can see the entire piece danced by Béjart himself. Directed by French director Louis Cuny, the film was projected for the first time at the Festival of Avant-garde held in Marseille in 1956.

All the cited quotes in this paper were translated from French by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Henry, *Journal de mes sons*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2004, p. 106.

## Henry's collaboration with Béjart 1956-1963

After this key work in 1956, Henry composed intensively and mostly for Béjart's performances. We could note that, from *Haut voltage* in 1956 to *La Reine verte* in 1963, most of Henry's works accompanied Béjart's choreographies. The list below enumerates those works in chronological order:

Pierre Henry's compositions		Maurice Béjart's adaptations	
Year	Title	Year	Title
1956	<i>Haut voltage</i>	1956	<i>Haut voltage</i>
1958	<i>Orphée ballet</i>	1958	<i>Orphée</i>
	<i>Coexistence</i>	1959	<i>Coexistence</i>
1959	<i>Investigations</i>	1959	<i>Signe</i>
	<i>Entité</i>		
1960	<i>Symphonie monotone</i>		
	<i>Faciès</i>		
1961	<i>La Noire à soixante</i>		
1962	<i>Le Voyage</i>	1962	<i>Le Voyage</i>
1963	<i>La Reine verte</i>	1963	<i>La Reine verte, 1965</i>
	<i>Variations pour une porte et un soupir</i>	1965	<i>Variations pour une porte et un soupir</i>

**Tableau 1:** Works by Henry (1956-1963) and their adaptations by Béjart

The day after Pierre Henry's death on July 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, the French media broadcasted several short programs and published a few articles about him, nearly always stating that he worked as Maurice Béjart's collaborator for his *Messe pour le temps présent* (1967), while overlooking prior joint work. However, their essential collaboration began long before this popular work was created in 1967, as shown on the list above.

It is also important to note that the years 1956-1963 correspond to Pierre Henry's transition from the GRMC (*Groupe de Recherches de Musique Concrète*) to his private studio. This transition was due to the fact that Henry had cut ties with Pierre Schaeffer in 1958, which led him to resign from his post in the GRMC and leave the Radio. However, we can assume that his collaboration with Béjart encouraged Henry to establish his position as an independent composer. Indeed, his creations with Béjart during this period had given the composer many opportunities to compose and perform his works. This musical success he had known with Béjart helped Henry found his own private studio and widen his sphere of activity over the years.

But why is Maurice Béjart so important in the musical creation of Pierre Henry? What role did the art of the choreographer play in Henry's work? And to what extent did Maurice Béjart influence the composer's musical world?

In addition to composing specially for Béjart, Pierre Henry accompanied his ballet company on tour as the sound director of the performance, particularly in the 1950s. This contact helped him discover the world of dance and the specific creative process of dance that influenced his musical composition. He said:

I was constantly by his side, like his sound man. I came to rehearsals, and even when I disagreed with what he was doing, I learned a lot. So much that I had the impression of composing only "*choreographable*" music, even if there was no intention to write for a dance or

a ballet in the beginning. To see the choreographer [Béjart] create, to be in his wake, gave me lots of ideas on the dynamics of movement which underpin the musical infrastructure.<sup>3</sup>

And Henry added that this influence became deeper and deeper as he continued his collaboration with Béjart:

[...] After *Symphonie pour un homme seul*, the percussion of *Le Cercle* and the flocculent music of *Arcane* [other Béjart's ballets that followed the *Symphonie*], I realized that the musical phrasing and its articulation could be integrated with a rhythmic gesture. Just like in *Haut voltage*, for example. In fact, when I was composing, I was conditioned by what happens when a choreography was being born. So, when I adapted "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" [for the musical composition of *Le Voyage*], I first made a scenic division, which was very choreographic. Immediately, I felt *Le Voyage* as ballet music. It had become second nature.<sup>4</sup>

With the above-mentioned *Le Voyage*, Henry's interest in dance seems to have reached its most intensive point.

## *Le Voyage*

*Le Voyage* is a meditative work inspired by "The Tibetan Book of the Dead", the text on Tibetan Buddhism. It was Pierre Henry himself who originally conceptualized the idea for Béjart's ballet. In early 1961, Béjart was looking for a theme for a ballet commissioned by the Cologne Opera of Germany. Pierre Henry proposed to Béjart to adapt this religious book and he finalized his composition for the ballet.

The ballet was premiered by Béjart's troupe on April 1962 and the performance was presented during one month in Cologne. Then, six years later, the ballet was readapted as *Le Voyage II* and this version was played many times.

*Le Voyage* is the journey of the human soul, after death and before rebirth. "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" evokes the forty-nine days (seven weeks) of the intermediate state after death, which means seven cycles of seven days. Accordingly, there are seven movements in the music, the whole piece forming a complete cycle. The first and last movements are symmetrical to each other:

- I. *Souffle 1* (Breath 1)
- II. *Après la mort 1: Fluide et mobilité d'un Larsen* (After Death 1: Fluid and Mobility of a Larsen)
- III. *Après la mort 2* (After Death 2)
- IV. *Les divinités paisibles* (The Peaceful Deities)
- V. *Les divinités irritées* (The Irritated Deities)
- VI. *Le couple* (The Couple)
- VII. *Souffle 2* (Breath 2)

The main role is a 'Man' who travels 'after death'. There are also other characters in the ballet as Henry's plot implies: The Couple, Three Gurus, The Peaceful Deities, The Irritated Deities, and The People of the street.

The only available video of this ballet is an extract of the second part<sup>5</sup> (*After Death 1*). As the subtitle (*Fluid and Mobility of a Larsen*) indicates, we can listen to a Larsen effect in this part.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> "Le Voyage" [extract], in *Béjart / Prospectives Part II*, documentary produced and directed by Merrill Brockway, WCBS-TV, 1971, VHS conserved at the National Dance Center (Pantin, France).

As for the dance parts, we can observe the movements of the dancer in accord with the subtle rhythm of musical sounds.

### **After *Le Voyage***

After some collaboration between the 1960s and early 1970s, the two artists have grown apart from each other and their collaboration was almost over. Pierre Henry talked about this in an interview recorded in 2004. According to him, this discord was caused by the evolution of BÉjart's musical tastes. He says:

There was a period when BÉjart wanted to taste all kinds of music. This is why he no longer worked with me, but rather with a young composer [Hugues Le Bars]. Hugues Le Bars (1950-2014) is, for me, a composer of song music, of advertisings. Maurice had been accustomed to a very regular rhythmic pattern, while my rhythms are irrational. They are not made for dance, unless we find correspondences as we did for *Symphonie pour un homme seul* and for *Le Voyage*. He had lost these points. [...] He no longer feels my groundwork and musical temporality.<sup>6</sup>

However, he strongly emphasizes on how Maurice BÉjart was exceptional for him among the choreographers who used his musical pieces. Merce Cunningham made his version of *Symphonie pour un homme seul* in 1952; Maguy Marin and George Balanchine choreographed successively on *Variations pour une porte et un soupir* in 1973 et 1974; and Henry composed *Kyldex* for Alwin Nicolais in 1973. Yet, according to the composer, these were not 'works' in the sense of what he did with BÉjart. Henry says: "With Maurice, we have done real works, which will live on", and he summarizes his relationship with the dance in this following text:

Between my music and the art of dance, there was a connection: the rhythm, the accents, the falls, the breaks. Before meeting BÉjart, I did not like dance, I knew nothing about it for that matter. I found the ballets conventional or even ridiculous. Then I started to look at the great solos, the *Pas de deux* of the repertoire. In the end, they energized my music.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, for Pierre Henry, his collaboration with Maurice BÉjart was first of all an important opportunity to discover the world of dance and then to deepen and develop his art of composition.

### **Conclusion**

From their encounter in 1954, Pierre Henry and Maurice BÉjart collaborated on more than fifteen choreographic performances altogether. Among these collaborations, the earliest ones marked an important turning point in the creations of both artists.

*Symphonie pour un homme seul* set off the collaboration between Henry and BÉjart. The former discovered the world of dance and the latter developed and established his own style of choreography. *Haut voltage*, Henry's first composition created specifically for BÉjart, explored a new compositional approach: a fusion of acoustic and electronic sounds in a work. Consequently, this first electroacoustic music piece became one of Henry's key works throughout his musical creation. With *Le Voyage*, Henry's interest in dance reached its most intensive point. While he proposed to BÉjart to adapt the Tibetan religious book, Henry

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Pierre Pastori, "Signé BÉjart et Pierre Henry : entretien avec Pierre Henry", *24 heures*, Dec/13/2004, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Henry, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

himself elaborated a script and finalized his composition with a scenic division for choreography.

In early 1970s, their active collaboration was almost over, which was caused by the evolution of Béjart's musical tastes. Henry explained that Béjart had lost his sensitivity for Henry's own particular musical temporality. However, Maurice Béjart remains an important and exceptional artist for Pierre Henry. His contact with Béjart helped him discover the art of dance and see the specific creative process of choreography. Furthermore, Henry's collaboration with Béjart had given the composer many opportunities to compose and perform his works in public. This musical success in his early carrier stage was one of the main factors that encouraged Henry to found his own private studio and to establish his position as an independent composer.

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