



**TRISTAN MURAIL**

**THE COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC**

**MARILYN NONKEN**



métier

***Comme un oeil suspendu et poli par le songe...*** (1967)

***Estuaire***(1972)

***Territoires de l'Oubli*** (1977)

***Cloches d'adieu, et un sourire... (in memoriam Olivier Messiaen)*** (1992)

***La Mandragore***(1993)

***Les Travaux et les Jours*** (2003)

The piano is considered by some as an anachronism: an instrument that remains almost exactly as it was in the nineteenth century, and which is still associated with the music of that era. Yet the piano works of Tristan Murail show how the instrument can be revitalized and heard anew. There is no question that his music belongs to the French tradition of Debussy, Ravel, and Messiaen. In a radical sense, however, his compositions chart an exploratory course, one that has led Murail away from traditional ideas of harmony, rhythm, and form towards an unparalleled understanding of the instrument. As his compositional ideas have evolved, his ability to manipulate the piano's resonance has reached an unprecedented level of sophistication. More than merely for the piano, Murail's works are about the piano.

Murail's musical vision transcends traditional notation. His sense of musical time is not based on a tangible pulse or standard musical durations. Rather, time's passing is measured in terms of how long things last: how many seconds it takes to build a sonority, or how long it takes for that sonority to fade. Intensity, too, is less about absolute dynamic than relative presence: some figures are to be played just above the resonance, or just below it, or at a "quasi"-dynamic determined in context. Thus, Murail has developed a highly personal notation, an idiosyncratic musical script mixing standard and graphic elements. Although extremely specific, it leaves the player free to respond to the characteristics and tendencies of the instrument at hand. His notation encourages sensitivity. At the same time, despite the inherently volatile and fragile acoustic environment, it demands spontaneity.

Playing Murail's music is an unusually exhibitionistic experience. Its tireless focus on the sound itself (how it is made, how it is sustained) renders the pianist uniquely exposed, as if captured by the lens of Lars Von Trier, or the pen of Michel Houellebecq. His music reveals the ephemeral intercourse between the player and the instrument. To me, there is an intimacy to these works that

invites the audience, not only to listen but to become involved in the drama taking place. While a great deal of “musical expression” is about finesse and disguise, Murail’s music gains its power for what it reveals, without metaphor or pretension: the mechanics of the instrument, the capacity of performer, and what, in all its flawed beauty, is performance in real time.

*Comme un oeil suspendu et poli par le songe...* was the audition piece Murail wrote to gain entry into the composition class of Olivier Messiaen. Its title (“Like an eye, suspended, and polished by a dream...”) is taken from a poem written by the composer’s father. In this ambitious student piece, with its lush harmonies, quirky rhythms, and sectional, cyclic structure, Messiaen’s influence is unmistakable. Yet *Comme un oeil...* is distinguished by its canny exploration of the piano’s resonance, carefully manipulated through the use of extreme registers, strictly controlled dynamics, and unusual pedalings. Already, Murail had begun to define a distinctive sound world.

If *Comme un oeil...* is a work of aspiration, *Estuaires* is one of contradiction. More graphic in nature than its predecessor, its score reflects Murail’s growing dissatisfaction with standard notation. The score is pioneering in its use of innovative pianistic techniques, indicated with detailed markings for pedalings, attacks, dynamics, articulations, and resonances. In terms of conception, however, it may be Murail’s most traditional work. While it does not follow a literary narrative or program, its two movements — *Pres des rives* (“On the banks”) and *Au melange des eaux* (“On the mixing of the waters”) — are filled with poetic references to crashing waves, the undertow, the breaking surf, even the call of a foghorn. Murail’s writing for piano has been profoundly influenced by Liszt, and *Estuaire* may be his most Romantic composition. Of his works for the instrument, it is the only one that seeks to evoke in such a visual, almost cinematographic way, and the only one whose score is filled with text and imagery. As in his *Couleurs de mer* (“Colors of the sea”), written during the same period, the emphasis is not on form or process, but nuance and shading.

Inspired largely by the composer’s work in electronic music, *Territoires de l’Oubli* (“Lands of the unknown”) is without peer in the twentieth-century repertoire. Perhaps in no other work can one hear the piano so transformed and its potential mined to such fantastic ends. With an aggressive, near-obsessive focus, *Territoires* unleashes not so much clouds as waves of sound. These sonorities are immediately caught in the damper pedal, which Murail uses, by keeping it depressed throughout the work, to create a continually evolving fantasia of resonance. In terms of acoustic phenomena, the “unknown territories” *Territoires* explores are landscapes of pianistic impossibility and auditory

illusion: notes heard but never played (sympathetic vibrations), microtones (resulting from the interaction of the harmonics), and sonorities that emerge seemingly without attack or decay. Depending on the nature of the material, the work's notation varies wildly. Some pages of the score are highly specific, measuring time to the fraction of the second. Other passages involve chance, including a cadenza in which the player must choose to repeat or omit certain materials, and a long passage in which the activities of the hands are not coordinated.

*Cloches d'adieu et un sourire...* ("Bells of farewell and a smile...") and *La Mandragore* ("The mandrake") are tributes to Messiaen and Ravel, respectively. *Cloches d'adieu* pays homage to Murail's teacher, and its final cadence quotes Messiaen's prelude *Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu* ("Bells of anguish and tears of farewell"). Legend maintains that the mandrake, a plant thought to have magical powers, grows in the shadow of the gallows. *La Mandragore* refers overtly to Ravel's *Le gibet* ("The gallows") from *Gaspard de la nuit*, and, although it does not literally quote Ravel, it shares with *Le gibet* decisive elements of form, harmony, and ambience. Written within a few years of each other, these two works share a certain elegance and restraint. They are sparing in their use of figuration and ornament and almost frugal in their placement of single notes, chords, and passagework. As *Territoires de l'Oubli* literally brutalizes the instrument (it is not unusual for strings to break during performance), *La Mandragore* and *Cloches d'adieu* are less physical, more cerebral and spiritual studies of sonority.

*Les Travaux et les Jours* ("Works and days"), whose title is taken from Hesiod, mirrors *Territoires de l'Oubli* in its expansiveness. A series of nine interconnected, unnamed miniatures, *Les Travaux et les Jours* places new emphasis on form and development. Each movement has its own shape and direction. However, distinctive motivic fragments recur and are developed throughout, creating a sense of continuity, perhaps narrative. The eighth movement retraces all that has happened thus far, offering a retrospective of previously heard fragments against a transformed harmonic backdrop. While this work features some of Murail's most contemplative writing (particularly the third and ninth movements), it is also unabashedly extroverted and confident in its use of virtuosity: brilliant passagework, grace-note figures, and arpeggiations. At the final cadence, which comes to rest on an undulating B-C ninth, *Les Travaux et les Jours* nods to *Territoires de l'Oubli*; this same distinctive interval, which begins and ends *Territoires*, plays a conspicuous role in both compositions. Murail has spoken of *Les Travaux* as possessing a sense of resolution lacking from its predecessor; yet,



in many ways, the more recent may be the more enigmatic work. I commissioned *Les Travaux et les Jours* from Murail with funds from the Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard University.

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Peut-on encore écrire pour le piano aujourd'hui ? L'instrument emblématique, le confident du compositeur, au XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle et au début du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle, a-t-il survécu aux diverses tortures que la fin du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle lui a infligées ? Après les clusters d'Henry Cowell, les préparations de John Cage, les percussions ormithologiques de Messiaen, les mantras électrififiés de Stockhausen, et les divers frottements ou pincements de cordes, quels espaces reste-il à l'imagination ?

Je crois que ma réponse, d'abord inconsciente, puis de plus en plus clairement articulée, a été de revenir à l'essence même du piano, à sa réalité acoustique, et d'ignorer aussi bien les bricolages à la mode, que les pesanteurs historiques.

Le piano: un instrument de percussion sans doute, mais surtout un ensemble de cordes vibrantes, une vaste chambre réverbérante.

La vibration des cordes du piano est complexe, le son vit et varie alors qu'il résonne. Le spectre sonore du piano est très particulier: les sons graves, surtout, présentent une distorsion harmonique (les partiels du son sont légèrement décalés vers l'aigu, en proportion de leur rang harmonique). Ceci donne au son du piano une qualité métallique et brillante – légèrement discordante en fait, "inharmonique", pour employer le terme technique précis.

Après l'une des exécutions des *Travaux et les Jours* par Marilyn Nonken, plusieurs collègues compositeurs m'exprimèrent leur étonnement d'avoir entendu un piano "microtonal". Le piano avait été bien sûr parfaitement accordé; l'effet provenait de l'écriture même de la pièce. C'est une question que l'on me pose souvent: "Votre écriture harmonique est microtonale, comment pouvez-vous écrire pour le piano, instrument tempéré par excellence?". Ma réponse est que, si le piano est effectivement accordé selon le tempérament égal, en raison d'un héritage historique, en revanche, ses sonorités, surtout dans le registre grave, sont riches et complexes, et regorgent d'harmoniques, non tempérées par nature.

Un exemple frappant de cette réalité acoustique du piano peut s'entendre à la fin de *Territoires*

de l'Oubli: un fa grave et un ré dièse médium sont longuement répétés; du fa, émerge clairement la septième harmonique, un ré dièse légèrement baissé. Cette harmonique du fa se heurte au ré# médium, qui se met à vibrer fortement. Même si dans d'autres contextes, le phénomène sera moins évident, ce genre d'interférences acoustiques va souvent modifier, enrichir la couleur des agrégats, et permettra au piano de s'évader hors du tempérament. Mon écriture du piano tente donc de repenser le piano de l'intérieur – ce qui ne veut pas dire jouer à l'intérieur du piano! Toutes mes pièces n'utilisent que le clavier, de manière "traditionnelle", mais tentent d'écouter le piano dans la vérité de ses résonances.

Repenser ne veut pas dire partir de rien, ce qui est bien sûr impossible. *Comme un œil...* porte l'influence de Messiaen; la pièce fut en fait écrite pour le concours d'entrée au Conservatoire National de Musique de Paris, donc avant d'étudier avec Messiaen. L'allusion à Messiaen se retrouve, quelques années plus tard, et de façon plus volontaire, dans *Cloches d'adieu...*, écrit en hommage au compositeur, peu de temps après sa disparition. Les "cloches" entendues dans la pièce appartiennent à la fois à l'univers de la musique "spectrale", et à celui de Messiaen.

*Estuaire* était une tentative de détourner l'esthétique sérielle à mon profit; j'essayais de lui faire dire ce qu'elle ne savait dire : images colorées, gestes, formes mouvantes. L'entreprise était paradoxale, et le résultat, ambigu. Une pièce de transition avant que je ne me libère complètement des modes stylistiques de l'époque, avec *Territoires de l'Oubli*, pièce véritablement écrite pour le piano, par le piano. La musique est déduite de la façon dont le piano sonne et résonne. L'écriture, virtuose, se réfère plus à Liszt qu'aux compositeurs du XXème siècle.

*La Mandragore* regarderait, elle, plutôt du côté de Ravel, sans qu'il n'y ait aucun emprunt, aucune citation; mais quelque chose dans l'humeur, dans la couleur générale de la pièce peut faire penser au Ravel de *Gaspard de la Nuit* et des *Miroirs*.

*Les Travaux et les Jours* renouent, d'une certaine façon, avec *Territoires de l'Oubli*, mais écoutent les résonances du piano d'une manière différente. L'œuvre cherche aussi à résoudre un problème formel: 9 pièces, indépendantes, mais minutieusement entrelacées. La musique tourne autour du trémolo si-do, et s'appuie sur la résonance d'un fa grave, qui n'est dévoilé qu'à l'extrême fin du cycle; comme *Territoires de l'Oubli*, afin que la boucle soit bouclée... provisoirement.

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Can one still write for the piano today? Through the 19th century and to the beginning of the 20th it was the emblematic instrument, the composer's confidant; but has it survived the array of tortures inflicted upon it by the end of the 20th century? After the clusters of Henry Cowell, the preparations of John Cage, the ornithological percussions of Messiaen, the electrified mantras of Stockhausen, and the various scrapings and pinchings of strings, what space is left to the imagination?

I think that my response, at first subconscious, but gradually more and more clearly articulated, has been to return to the true essence of the piano, to its acoustic realities, and to ignore the trivialities of fashion as well as the weight of history.

The piano: undoubtedly a percussion instrument, but above all a collection of vibrating strings, a vast reverberant chamber.

The vibration of piano strings is complex, the sound alive and varied as it resonates. The resonating spectrum of the piano is particularly distinctive: the low sounds especially are characterised by harmonic distortion (the partials of the sound are slightly too high in proportion to their harmonic rank). This gives the piano a metallic and brilliant quality, lightly discordant in fact, 'inharmonic' to use a precise technical term.

After a performance of *Les Travaux et les Jours* by Marilyn Nonken, several composer colleagues expressed their astonishment at having heard a 'microtonal' piano. The piano had certainly been perfectly tuned; the effect was due entirely to the way in which the piece had been written. A question that is often asked of me is: "Your harmonic writing is microtonal, how do you write for the piano, the perfect tempered instrument?" My response is that although the piano is effectively tuned according to equal temperament because of our historical heritage, its sonorities, above all in the lowest register, are rich and complex, bursting with harmonics, and naturally untempered.

An illustration of the piano's acoustical reality can be heard at the end of *Territoires de l'Oubli*: a low F and a middle register D sharp are repeated over and over; from this F the seventh harmonic emerges clearly, a low D sharp. This harmonic from the F excites the middle register D sharp which begins to vibrate strongly. Even if in other contexts the phenomenon is less evident, this type of acoustic interference often modifies and enriches the colour of chords and allows the piano to work outside of its temperament. My writing for the piano attempts therefore to rethink the interior of

the piano – that is not to suggest that one plays inside the piano (all of my pieces only use the keyboard in a traditional manner) but attempting to listen to the piano in the truth of its resonances.

'Rethinking' is not the same as starting from nothing, which is clearly impossible. *Comme un oeil...* carries the influence of Messiaen; the piece was written for the entrance exam of the Conservatoire National de Musique de Paris, therefore before my studies with Messiaen. An allusion to the composer is found several years later and more consciously in *Cloches d'adieu...* written as a homage a little time after his death. The 'bells' heard in the piece belong to the universe of spectral music and to that of Messiaen.

*Estuaire* was an attempt at appropriating the serial aesthetic for my own benefit; I was trying to make it say something that it couldn't say: coloured images, gestures, moving shapes. The enterprise was paradoxical, and the result ambiguous, a transitional work. After this I managed to completely liberate myself from the stylistic fashions of the day, with *Territoires de l'Oubli*, a piece truly written for the piano, by the piano. The music is created from the way in which the instrument rings and resonates. The virtuosic writing refers more to Liszt than to the composers of the twentieth century.

*La Mandragore* is suggestive of Ravel, though without borrowing or quotation; but something in the mood, in the overall colour of the piece makes one think of Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* and *Miroirs*.

*Les Travaux et les Jours* is connected in a certain way to *Territoires de l'Oubli*, but listening to the resonances of the piano in a different manner. The work also looks to resolve a formal problem: 9 independent pieces, but minutely intertwined. The music revolves around a B-C tremolo and is supported on the resonance of a low F which is only unveiled right at the end of the cycle; as in *Territoires de l'Oubli*, allowing the loop to be closed... for now.

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**TRISTAN MURAIL**, born in 1947 at Le Havre, France, received degrees in classical and North African Arabic and economics before turning to composition. A student of Olivier Messiaen, he won the Prix de Rome in 1971 and spent two years at the Villa Médicis. In 1973, upon returning to Paris, he founded the Itinéraire ensemble with a group of young composers and performers, and the group became widely renowned for its groundbreaking explorations of the relationship between instrumental performance and electronics. Murail has received awards from Académie Française and SACEM, and was awarded, in 1992, the Grand Prix du Disque and the Grand Prix du Président de la République, Académie Charles Cross. Today, Murail is recognized, along with Gerard Grisey, as a founding figure of the spectral music movement, an aesthetic revolution focused on harmony in new music and its relation to acoustics, instruments, and perception.

In the 1980s, Murail began using computer technology to further his research into acoustic phenomena. This led him to years of collaboration with IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique), where he directed the composition program from 1991 to 1997 and helped develop the Patchwork composition software.

Murail has taught at schools and festivals worldwide, including the Paris Conservatoire, IRCAM, the Darmstadt Ferienkurse, the Abbaye de Royaumont, and Toho University in Tokyo. He is a professor of composition at Columbia University. His works are published by Salabert and Éditions Lemoine and recorded on the Una Corda, Adés, and MFA-Radio France labels.

**MARILYN NONKEN** has emerged as one of the most gifted young musicians dedicated to the modern and contemporary repertoires. Upon her 1993 New York debut, she was heralded as “a determined protector of important music” (New York Times), and she has appeared on the Boston Globe’s “Best of the Year” list five consecutive times. She has been presented in the United States, France, Canada, Denmark, Australia, Italy, the Czech Republic, England, Belgium, and the Netherlands, by institutions including Carnegie Hall, IRCAM, Lincoln Center, Théâtre Bouffe du Nord, the Guggenheim Museum, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Kettle’s Yard.

Commissions include works dedicated to her by Milton Babbitt, Mario Davidovsky, Chris Dench, Pascal Dusapin, Jason Eckardt, Michael Finnissy, Tristan Murail, and David Rakowski, among

others. She has collaborated with Alvin Lucier, Christian Wolff, and Jonathan Harvey and toured with the complete piano music of Murail, Boulez, and Schoenberg.

An acclaimed chamber musician, she has performed with the Group for Contemporary Music, Elision, and Ensemble 21, which she co-founded. She has also appeared as a guest artist with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and New Music NOW (Chicago Symphony). Her discography features recordings on Mode, New World Records, Lovely Music, Albany, Metier, and CRI. Solo discs include *American Spiritual*, a CD of works written for her, and Morton Feldman's *Triadic Memories*.

A student of David Burge at the Eastman School, she received a Ph.D. degree in musicology from Columbia University. Her writings have been published in *Perspectives of New Music*, *Agni*, *Current Musicology*, and the *Journal of the Institute for Studies in American Music*. She also edited "Performers on Performance," a special issue of *Contemporary Music Review*.

Ms. Nonken is a Steinway Artist.

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